

Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life

By Andy Fisher

Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002

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Reviewed by Almut Beringer

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Andy Fisher's book, published in the SUNY series in Radical Social and Political Theory, is to me the most comprehensive and compelling conceptual-theoretical contribution to ecopsychology to date. At the same time, the book is highly practical: one of Fisher's objectives is to propose (eco)psychology as a foundation for a critical theory of modern society. Conceived of as an original introduction to ecopsychology, Fisher argues that ecopsychology has to be a force for social change. In his foreword, David Abram praises it as "the most important work yet written on ecopsychology from a clinical perspective." Fisher's book — the published version of his doctoral dissertation, *Nature and Experience: A Radical Approach to Ecopsychology* (York University 2001) — gives the field of ecopsychology a necessary and very welcome theoretical foundation. From this foundation, further conceptual work and empirical studies can proceed, perhaps now with more credibility and subject to less criticism from the mainstream that the field lacks academic rigor.

Throughout the book, Fisher describes ecopsychology as a project, rather than as a field or discipline — yet his substantial, rich, and in-depth account of what he calls a 'psychology in the service of life' could well be the treatise which the field has needed to move forward to become a respected subdiscipline within psychology. In Part I of the book, Fisher lays the groundwork by describing this 'project of ecopsychology' and identifying the 'problem with normal,' meaning the dualism of outer, objective, and inner, subjective reality which has become part of 'normal' mainstream psychological discourse but which ecopsychology seeks to transcend. Further, Fisher critiques the economic and technocratic discourses within psychology and other sciences that prevent a true and radical 'greening' of the disciplines. He outlines four interrelated tasks to define his version of ecopsychology: the psychological task — "to acknowledge and better understand the human-nature relationship *as a relationship*" (emphasis added); the philosophical task — "to place psyche (soul) back into the natural world;" the practical task — "to develop therapeutic and recollective practices toward an ecological society," in the sense of remembering how the human

psyche is embedded in the larger psyche of nature and of re-learning how to live well within animate, and perhaps sacred, natural worlds; and last, the critical task — "to engage in ecopsychologically-based criticism," i.e., to challenge the widespread and pervasive anthropocentrism in modern western society.

In 'the problem with normal,' Fisher makes the case for his methods to move from dualistic understandings (human/nature, inner/outer, subjective/objective) which characterize mainstream psychology, to hermeneutics, which, as he claims, "can work in the difficult space between the 'human' and the 'natural,'" which can bring to light as yet undisclosed aspects of the human-nature relationship. The rhetorical method allows Fisher to investigate and understand the symbolic and metaphorical nature of reality. Both methods, he argues, "can speak to the felt reality of our alienated relationship with the life process and then say something critical that might help move our society forward..."

In Part II, titled *Nature and Experience*, Fisher details this version of ecopsychology. He proposes a three-pronged approach to ecopsychology: 1) naturalistic, which "aims to link claims and limits of human nature to the claims and limits of the natural world," 2) experiential, which "uses bodily-felt meaning as its touchstone and makes thematic the natural ordering of our experience," and 3) radical, which "locates itself within critical currents within both psychology and ecology." Departing from humanistic psychology, and to highlight the interconnection between humans and nature which mainstream psychology has so often overlooked, Fisher sketches a 'naturalistic psychology' — a psychology which places the human mind back into the natural world and which accepts the demands, constraints, and opportunities the natural order places on human experience. In his own words, "[n]aturalistic psychology pays attention both to our experience of nature and to the nature in our experience; and suggests that to recover our experiencing is to better hear the voice of the life process." The emphasis on bodily-felt-lived experience and its interpretation via phenomenology is at the center of Fisher's analysis. By acknowledging and analyzing how human and 'more-than-human' nature continues to be mistreated — mistreatment which is the source of much (arguably unnecessary) suffering — the book receives a very practical touch.

The last chapter, *Making Sense of Suffering in a Technological World*, asks us to recognize the suffering intrinsic to the modern technologized and economized society, caused by technology not fulfilling (human) nature but instead violating it and impoverishing human-(natural) world relations. The chapter also calls for creating loving conditions to help bear this pain and suffering. In doing so, says Fisher, "we may both discover what our suffering means and

work toward a society more congruent with and respectful of our nature and our experience.”

Fisher draws on an extensive range of material from humanistic psychology, hermeneutics, phenomenology, radical ecology, nature writing, and critical theory. The one conceptual critique I have of Fisher’s analysis is that to me, he misses the spiritual dimension of the human psyche-nature connection. In his analysis, the internal realm is that of the mind, the mental life, and the ‘anima.’ Yet soul and the spiritual life can be understood in non-psychological or religious ways, which would give rise to a more holistic analysis. Further, in Fisher’s interpretation, experience is bodily-felt, rather than more encompassing to go beyond the physical realm. The book’s style has been described as ‘personal’ and ‘dense.’ Although advertised as ‘an original introduction to ecopsychology,’ it is probably best suited for graduate study and beyond.

Psychology of Sustainable Development

Edited by Peter Schmuck and P. Wesley Schultz
Boston, MA: Kluwer, 2002
ISBN: 1-4020-7012-8

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Psychology of Sustainable Development is an excellent resource for conservation psychology researchers, especially those with an interest in development issues. Befitting its focus on international sustainability issues, the contributors hail from seven countries, giving the book a distinctively international flavor. The book brings the uninitiated reader up to speed by summarizing the unsustainable impacts of human behavior on the environment, and defining the multi-dimensional sustainability concept. However, the key contributions of the book are to provide psychological perspectives on *why* human impacts on the environment have become so severe, and to suggest how psychology may help design interventions to mitigate these impacts. Notably, the book includes both individual and societal level factors driving behavior.

The book consists of fifteen chapters organized into four topical sections and a conclusion chapter. The first section introduces sustainable development and some ways that society may approach it. The second section explores the extent to which some people behave more sustainably than others, and reasons for these differences. The third section explores the role of culture in sustainable development. The fourth

section presents some exemplary sustainable development projects that demonstrate how some of the principles presented in the previous sections can be translated into action. In the conclusion chapter, Oskamp offers a very useful synthesis of the issues raised in previous sections of the book and suggests directions for future research.

In the first section, Schmuck and Schultz introduce the role of psychology in promoting sustainability. Specifically, psychology helps to explain why sustainable and non-sustainable behaviors occur, and how to develop interventions to increase sustainable behaviors and decrease non-sustainable behaviors. They also describe each of the chapters that follow. Next, McKenzie-Mohr argues that to approach sustainability, humans must limit growth of population and affluence, and must increase technological efficiency. He then describes a community based social marketing approach for promoting these changes, including the five steps of selecting target behaviors to promote, identifying barriers to adoption of these behaviors, developing strategies to overcome these barriers, pilot testing interventions, and implementing interventions more widely. Finally, Osbaldiston and Sheldon describe the “tragedy of the commons” and traditional legal, informational, and economic approaches to alleviating it, and argue that a psychological approach promoting internalization of sustainable behaviors may be more effective.

The next set of chapters focuses on reasons for individual differences in sustainable behaviors, both showing that a sustainable lifestyle is presently feasible, and identifying factors that encourage or discourage sustainability. Drawing upon the psychological literatures on self, relationships, and attitudes, Schultz presents a model for “inclusion with nature.” This model describes how including nature in the self-concept might lead to greater degrees of commitment to protect nature. DuNann Winter argues that sustainable development will require empowering women, and presents examples of exemplary sustainable development projects that do this. She claims female voices are especially valuable, since studies show women have more intimate knowledge of some environmental issues and tend to be more concerned about the environment than men. Kals and Maes point out that the role of emotions has been relatively neglected by researchers working on sustainability issues, compared to cognitive and general personality variables, yet they show how moral emotions and emotional affinity towards nature can be strong predictors of sustainability behaviors. Degenhardt next utilizes qualitative data on sustainable “lifestyle pioneers” in developed countries to show that sustainable lifestyles can benefit those who adopt them, and to identify factors that may drive these “pioneers,” including emotional consternation about environmental degradation and social inequality, and life experiences related to sustainability.

The chapters on culture and sustainability focus on factors larger than the individual that may drive sustainable versus unsustainable behaviors. Gouveia provides an excellent review of cross-cultural psychology research on the self, and explores the relationship between independent versus interdependent self-concepts, and indicators of sustainable development. Specifically, interdependent self-concepts were positively correlated with environmental sustainability indicators, while independent self-concepts were positively correlated with economic, institutional, and social sustainability indicators. Next, Cock argues that to encourage sustainability, psychology needs to help people redevelop feelings of connectedness and interdependence with nature. Finally, using the example of unsustainable management of African game, du Toit contends that human behavior is evolutionarily determined to maximize resource consumption of self and kin.

The final set of chapters present examples of real-world sustainable development initiatives informed by some of the principles presented earlier. Bandura describes how serial television dramas have been successfully used to promote population control techniques in developing countries, illustrating a theoretical model of social-cognitive communications. Eigner and Schmuck describe an interdisciplinary project to convert an entire German village to using renewable energy, including a) the psychological rationale for the process used, such as the importance of positive framing, b) details of the process, such as the procedure for selecting the village, and c) expected environmental and psychological outcomes, such as increases in local biodiversity and environmental concern. Jiménez-Domínguez reviews some key issues in sustainable development, and describes the City, Identity, and Sustainability network project (CIS), which has shown that urban groups (e.g., barrios in Guadalajara, Mexico) whose members identify more highly with the group adopt more sustainable practices than urban groups with lower levels of social identity. Friedman argues that for consumer actions to punish (“boycott”) or reward (“buycott”) companies effectively, they need to have a simple message promoted by a carefully timed large publicity campaign. Finally, Oskamp’s chapter summarizes the contributions and main themes in the previous chapters, and suggests directions for future psychology of sustainability research.

Overall, the book defines sustainability, describes some psychological reasons why human impacts on the environment have become so severe, and suggests some psychologically based interventions that may increase sustainable behaviors and decrease non-sustainable behaviors. Some chapters do an especially good job of reviewing basic psychological research (e.g., Osbaldiston and Sheldon on cooperation, Schultz on the self, Gouveia on cross-cultural psy-

chology), and showing how it is relevant to addressing the specific sustainability problem at hand. Such integration is very important because there is limited psychological research on many specific environmental sustainability issues (e.g., encouraging purchasing of fuel-efficient vehicles or reducing water consumption), but there are many relevant theories and findings in areas such as social psychology, cognitive psychology, and measurement, that may be drawn upon.

As in many edited books, some topics are repeated more than necessary from chapter to chapter. For example, descriptions of human impacts on the environment appear repeatedly, though these have already been described in many other venues. Also, some authors engage in moral and ethical argumentation. While important, moral persuasion is not where psychologists can be most useful. Psychologists are especially well suited to focus on *why* people do what they do, and how to change this behavior. Fortunately, most of the book does just this.

Psychology of Sustainable Development is an excellent resource for researchers exploring the interface of psychology with environmental issues, and for sustainable development researchers. It would also serve as a useful supplementary reader for courses on sustainable development and environmental or conservation psychology.

Children and Nature: Psychological, Sociocultural and Evolutionary Investigations

Edited by Peter H. Kahn, Jr. and Stephen R. Kellert
 Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002
 ISBN: 0-262-61175-9

Reviewed by Susan Clayton
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This book adds to a small but growing body of literature providing a scientific basis for the argument that nature is important to the psychological well-being of humans. As such, it makes a much-needed contribution. There are many useful volumes describing the importance of nature from an ecological perspective; few would question the extent to which humans are dependent on natural resources and on the services (such as pollination, cleansing of air, etc.) provided by biological entities. There are biographies and autobiographies describing how specific individuals care about nature, and philosophical approaches making the argument for why people should protect nature, but there is a relatively small

intersection between environmental studies and empirical social science. I do not mean to overlook the excellent books that do exist on this topic, including previous works both by the editors and by many of the contributors, but merely to argue that we need more like them. If people are to be motivated to make behavioral changes to protect the environment, we need to move beyond anecdote and speculation, and collect hard data about why people value, or should value, nature.

Within that area, this volume has specific strengths. First, it carves out its own topic focus, the impact of nature on children's experience and development, which has not previously received this level of attention in the literature. Second, it brings an impressive range of perspectives to bear on that topic, from an evolutionary analysis to clinical applications, from a discussion of cognitive processes to speculation about moral implications. Finally, almost all chapters give some consideration to the practical implications of what they have to say. We are left with a new understanding of the ways in which children are affected by nature and with promising guideposts for both research and policy initiatives.

Kahn and Kellert group the chapters into three categories, proceeding from the evolutionary through the psychological and finally the sociocultural. In other words, the context within which the relationship to nature is examined gradually narrows. The book begins with a chapter on primate relationships with nature, not even limited to the human species, and follows this with two chapters that examine the human relationship to nature across evolutionary history. The next chapters describe ways in which children relate to nature in a general way, which is more or less specific to the current historical time period, but not limited to a particular cultural context. The book then moves to analyses of the ways children relate to the natural world in specific contexts, such as zoos and residential treatment centers. Subsequent chapters examine specific needs, preferences, or uses of nature among adolescents. The final two chapters speculate about effects of the degradation of the environment, and the loss of exposure to nature, on the experiences and development of children.

The chapters are diverse not just in perspective, but in their goals and in the types of evidence they use. This, too, is a strength of the book. I found the chapters by Heerwagen and Orions, Kellert, Kahn, and Kaplan and Kaplan particularly useful in providing theoretical frameworks in order to make sense of a diverse body of empirical evidence. Verbeek and de Waal, and Coley, Solomon, and Shafto, brought to bear scientific perspectives that are of clear relevance outside the area of environmental studies. As such they provide useful theoretical grounding for those interested in the natural environment, and may also provide legitimacy with those who need to be convinced that this is an appropriate field for

scientific inquiry. Myers and Saunders, Katcher, Thomashow, and Pyle give rich descriptions of lived experiences, demonstrating the practical significance of experiences with nature for children. Chawla speculates provocatively about the importance of nature experiences for the content of children's consciousness. And Orr provides both the most grounding in non-psychological factors (physical health, technology, political and legal systems) and the most passionate call for a change in the way we interact with the natural world. Although the book is organized to read well from cover to cover, it is also quite easy for readers with a particular agenda to sample the chapters that have the most interest and/or relevance to them.

So obvious that it may be overlooked is the fact that this book illuminates not only our understanding of the significance of experiences with nature but also our conception of children's development. Examining developmental changes in the way children think about nature, in their preferences for interacting with nature, or in the benefits they receive from specific types of interaction, provides evidence relevant to theoretical formulations about, for example, identity development or moral reasoning, as well as fertile ground for the development of new hypotheses and theories.

Robert Gifford (1976) has described the phenomenon of "environmental numbness," referring to our tendency to be inattentive to the physical environment and the ways in which it affects us. This numbness is reflected, I believe, in the overwhelming tendency of psychologists to examine thoughts, feelings, and behavior that have been abstracted from any physical context. Recently this general tendency toward environmental numbness may have been exacerbated by a kind of denial, or despair — a feeling that the news about environmental changes is so bad and our ability to affect it so miniscule that we prefer to avoid thinking about it. This book serves as an antidote to numbness. It draws attention to the need for research on the ways in which children, and people in general, are affected by the natural environment. It highlights the need for pro-environmental action. Finally, and importantly, it inspires hope by demonstrating the many ways in which people are aware of the value of nature. We are left with the feeling that the struggle to protect nature is even more important than we may have thought, but also that there are more allies in that struggle than we may have recognized.

References

Gifford, R. 1976. Environmental numbness in the classroom. *Journal of Experimental Education* 44, 4-7.

Psychology and Environmental Change

By Raymond S. Nickerson
Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2003
ISBN: 0-8058-4097-4

Reviewed by Stuart Oskamp
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This book starts from the premise that detrimental environmental changes are “among the more serious problems we face as individuals, as a nation, and as a species” (p. 1). Its author, Raymond Nickerson, is a noted experimental psychologist who has done applied research on some of these problems over many years. He is convinced that many fields of psychology have much to offer in working to solve or ameliorate these problems — factual knowledge, relevant theories, and valuable research methods — and that more psychologists should be strongly engaged in advancing environmental protection. I and many others in conservation psychology agree with him completely on this, and I applaud his dedicated work in this volume, summarizing the myriad ways in which psychologists can contribute!

“What kind of a planet do we want?” (p. 217). The book ranges broadly and systematically over many aspects of environmental problems, and over a wide variety of topics and research approaches on which psychologists have made and/or could make valuable contributions to environmental conservation. In each area Nickerson briefly but carefully outlines some of the main findings and issues involved, as well as suggesting important research questions that psychologists could usefully address. The key word here is “research,” for the major emphasis of the book is not on what we know, nor what policies we should adopt, but rather on important questions we should study, which are discussed in each chapter.

The book’s 13 chapters divide, in my view, into four groups. In the first three chapters, the stage is set by summarizing 15 aspects of Earth’s environmental degradation, ranging from global warming and stratospheric ozone depletion to wetland loss, toxic and radioactive waste, industrial accidents, and natural disasters. Chapter 3 also discusses 20 ways in which human behavior is a major cause of environmental degradation. A few examples are over reliance on fossil fuels, unsustainable agriculture, habitat destruction, business decisions that damage the environment, improper waste disposal, excessive consumption, failure to recycle materials, and failure to limit population growth.

The next two chapters summarize many key areas of psychological research on attitudes and on behavior change that are specifically relevant to preserving Earth’s environ-

mental resources. Examples are assessing environmental quality, conserving energy, reducing waste production, antilittering campaigns, the importance of choice, a sense of control, and commitment, information feedback, social norms, and effecting lasting change.

Beginning the book’s second half, Nickerson presents three chapters dealing with issues of technology — enhancing technological efficiency, substituting resource-light for resource-heavy technologies, and designing and evaluating artifacts such as products, databases, and models that are used in understanding and influencing environmental changes. Among the many topic areas here are more efficient use of water, improving mass transportation, radioactive waste treatment, farming and food production, electronic documents, telecommuting, designing products for longevity and recyclability, and methods for interdisciplinary and international cooperation. Within each of the topic areas, human needs, preferences, and habits are discussed as key factors that encourage or discourage adoption and use of the technologies.

The final four chapters before the short ending summary address four major areas of psychological study that have central importance in environmental preservation efforts. Chapter 9 (*Consumption, Consumerism, and Environmental Economics*) includes topics such as fashion, advertising, consumer education, and media effects on public opinion. Chapter 10 (*Risk and the Psychology of Prevention*) includes expert versus lay perceptions of risk, difficulties in predicting effects of policy changes, communication of risks, and human responses to risky situations. Chapter 11 discusses difficulties and issues concerning cost-benefit and tradeoff analyses. Chapter 12 examines competition, cooperation, negotiation, and policymaking, with attention to social dilemmas, conflict resolution, and decision-making research.

Nickerson’s volume seems to be aimed primarily as a text for a course on psychological aspects of global environmental change, or as a useful reference work to introduce research psychologists to the multitude of psychological topics that bear on environmental quality. Its 65 pages of references present a particularly complete and wide-ranging summary of key research findings from many disparate sources. Though familiar with many of the areas, I constantly found myself checking his references to see where novel (to me) topics and findings had been published.

In the book’s admirably thorough coverage, I did find a few topics that I feel should have been added: inefficiencies in U.S. transportation, the concept and measurement of quality of life, evidence on committed environmentally protective lifestyles, and the crucial importance of following the Precautionary Principle in situations where risk quantification is highly uncertain. One thing that this book is not,

which may disappoint many potential readers, is a guide for environmental activists, or even a strong advocacy tract. Nickerson is dedicated to the importance of environmental preservation and he is convinced of the value of psychological research to that goal. However, his writing is extremely dispassionate and judicious, attempting to be even-handed, objective, and analytical in presenting facts on both (all) sides of key issues. Thus, though he affirms that detrimental environmental change is a serious threat (p. 12) and gives priority to discussing global warming, he also gives considerable space to critics of the concept of global warming and to the uncertainties in predicting future CO₂ levels, effects of cloud cover, etc.

Similarly, in discussing estimates that Earth's human population may double in this century, he merely says,

[T]here are differences of opinion as to the ability of a population of double the current one to feed itself; some believe that mass starvation is inevitable with a population this size, others think food should not pose a serious problem....The future availability of adequate fresh water is as uncertain as the future availability of sufficient food. (p. 69)

Readers with activist or advocacy interests may want to consult an empirically based but passionate volume that does not hesitate to recommend environmentally friendly individual behaviors or apparently well-founded policy advocacy positions on crucial issues of environmental destruction, such as Winter and Koger's, *The Psychology of Environmental Problems* (2nd Edition).

The beginning quotation in this review is another example of Nickerson's dispassionate, analytical style: environmental deterioration is "among the more serious problems." (I would say "probably the most serious long-term problem for humanity.") His book is definitely not a call to action (except for doing research), and it does not offer any clear priorities about what actions might be most important to take in combating environmental degradation — a topic that is more thoroughly treated in Gardner and Stern's (1996) book, *Environmental Problems and Human Behavior*.

Granting that limitation, Nickerson has done a masterful job in collecting and summarizing research findings on a multitude of topics and issues where psychologists can make useful contributions to understanding environmental problems and preserving "the kind of planet we want." I join him in hoping that legions of psychologically oriented readers will accept the challenge he offers.

New Book Announcements

Psychological Theories for Environmental Issues

Edited by Mirilia Bonnes, Terence Lee and Marino Bonaiuto

Adershort, UK: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2003

Series: Ethnoscapes

ISBN: 0-7546-1888-9

Environmental psychology is an increasingly important area of research, focusing on the individual and social factors responsible for many critical human responses to the physical environment. With such rapid and widespread growth, the main theoretical strands have often been left unclear and their scientific and practical implications have been underdeveloped. Some of the key concepts addressed in this volume such as place attachment, rhetorical approach, and theories of identity and schemata, are given a broader context within the psychology of cognition, perception and social discourse.

With chapters by an international selection of authors, this stimulating book compares the different theories, assessing each one's possibilities and limitations, and demonstrates how each approach has been used for the development of knowledge in environmental psychology. The research area infiltrates a broad selection of disciplines, including psychology, architecture, planning, geography, sociology, environmental issues, economics and law. This book offers significant contributions to a wide range of policy issues, and will prove invaluable to both academics and practitioners. In addition to the trio of editors, chapter authors include Aiello, Baroni, Biasi, Breakwell, Giannini, Giuliani, and Staats.

Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature

Edited by Susan Clayton and Susan Opatow

Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, in press

ISBN: 0-262-03311-9

This volume presents empirical research and theory on the ways in which nature is significant to human identity, and how identity matters in determining human responses to the natural environment. It is premised on the idea that environmental conflicts will be neither understood nor constructively resolved unless we recognize the ways in which they reflect individual and group identities. Similarly, attempts to change behavior that ignore environmental and social identities may be ineffectual. The book proposes an overall structure for an emerging field and directions for research.

Fifteen chapters, predominantly by social scientists, approach the topic of identity and the natural world. In addition to offering theoretical advances for identity and environmental studies, the papers address the practical and puzzling question — Why does regard for the natural environment not always lead to action to protect it? Topics range from chil-

dren's reasoning about nature, through community tree-planting programs, to the impact of group identities in environmental conflicts. Because of the diversity of methodological approaches, models of human-nature interaction, and environmental contexts, this book is relevant to a broad range of readers.