

## Shamanic Medicines & Eco-Consciousness: A Conversation with **Dennis McKenna, Ph.D.**

By Dennis McKenna, Ph.D. and David Jay Brown



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**E**thnopharmacologist **Dennis McKenna, Ph.D.** is one of the world's experts in tryptamine hallucinogens. He received his doctorate in Botanical Science in 1984 from the University of British Columbia, and was a primary organizer and key scientific collaborator for the Hoasca Project, an international biomedical study of ayahuasca. McKenna has conducted extensive ethnobotanical fieldwork in the Peruvian, Colombian, and Brazilian Amazon, has helped to develop natural products into medicines, and is the author of more than 35 scientific papers. McKenna also coauthored *The Invisible Landscape* with his brother Terence. To follow are excerpts from a recent interview that I did with Dennis about ecology and psychedelics, followed by an excerpt from his essay "Ayahuasca and Human Destiny." The complete interview that I did with Dennis will appear in my forthcoming book, *Renaissance of the Mind*, and his complete essay, along with references, is available at: [www.maps.org/news-letters](http://www.maps.org/news-letters) –DJB

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David: *I'm curious about what type of relationship you see between psychedelics and ecology. Do you see psychedelics playing a role to help increase ecological awareness?*

Dennis: I do. I talk about this in my essay "Ayahuasca and Human Destiny." I think that this is probably what's going on, and it's not just with ayahuasca--it's with all of these psychedelic plants that are used in shamanic traditions. Rather than use the term "entheogen," which has one kind of connotation, or "psychedelic," which has another connotation, I prefer the term "shamanic medicine." The term hallucinogen doesn't fully describe these plants either, and, in fact, it kind of mis-describes what they're about. But I like the term "shamanic medicines."

In a sense, these are plants that are at the core of a set of indigenous practices, having to do with deliberately inducing altered states of consciousness, in such a way that one can learn from those altered

states. Whether, in fact, this actually involves supernatural realms, or some sort of super-consciousness, I don't know, but that is really what shamanism is about. And I think that what we're seeing in the millennia-old association between shamanic medicines, or psychedelic plants, and humans is essentially a symbiosis, a form of co-evolution.

This is nothing really that unusual in the plant kingdom. Plants and fungi make a large variety of so-called secondary molecules. There's an enormous chemical diversity of these secondary compounds, and they're not essential for life because they don't occur in all species. But in the species that do make them, they serve a function--and the function that they serve is basically a messenger function. In a sense, the secondary compounds are a language for the plants. It's the way that plants communicate with other organisms in their environments and maintain

their relationships. In some cases the communication is quite simple. It can be something like a repellent, or a defensive compound. But when you're interacting with organisms that have complex nervous systems, it gets a little more interesting, a little more complicated, and I think that bottom line on the evolutionary scale is that these plants are teachers.

This isn't really a scientific theory. It's more a personal belief, I suppose--but it's one that is verifiable to an extent. These plants are trying to teach our species about nature, and about how we fit into that. In some ways, you could say it's essentially a conduit to a community of species' mind. Or, if you subscribe to the idea that all of the species on the planet are organized into something like a conscious being, like Gaia, then these are the tools that let us communicate directly with Gaia, directly with that consciousness. This is done for all sorts of reasons, but partly, I think, to understand both nature, and the processes that go on within it.

For example, shamans use psychedelic plants all the time to understand the properties of other plants that they may use for curing or other types of activities. So there is a library of information out there, and psychedelic plants are kind of like the operating system that lets you access that and understand it. So I think that's part of the purpose of these things.

I think that the other part of the message--at least in my own personal experiences with psychedelics, and in many other people's--is that Gaia, if you will, through these plants, through these substances that seem so close to our neural chemistry, is trying to tell us to wake up, to realize the context in which we inhabit this ecology, and reorder our thinking accordingly. The message is that we're part of nature, and that we have to nurture nature. We have to be humble, and, as a species, we're not particularly humble. And we have to understand that we don't own nature, and nature is not there for us to exploit, deplete, and destroy. We have to rediscover a different attitude toward nature, a different way of looking at nature, and living in nature.

And I think that in indigenous cultures, where psychedelic shamanism plays a role, they don't really have a problem with this. This is why their cultures can be sustainable, and they can live in natural ecologies for long periods of time without really depleting their resources or spoiling their habitats. I think that the message, in some ways, has gotten more desperate. Or maybe it's our perception that it's more desperate, as Western culture has become more estranged from nature. And a

lot of very peculiar attitudes have cropped up in Western culture, that have now been propagated globally, which I think are very unhealthy and very threatening to the stability of the planet.

So if there is an intelligence resident in nature, that communicates to us through psychedelics, it's getting a little hysterical. It's like, hey pick up the phone and listen! There's important information that you need to hear. So I think that's where the connection comes with ecology, in connecting with this planetary consciousness, for a number of reasons. One of the things that psychedelics do--and this has been well elucidated through neurophysiology and neuroscience--is they activate (or perhaps in some way they suppress) those parts of the limbic system, those parts of the brain, that are involved with defining the boundaries between the self and the world. They dissolve those boundaries, and we invest a lot of time in defining who we are and what separates us from everything else out there--when, in fact, this is an illusion.

We know that we are all part of a continuum, and a model that's closer to reality is to realize that we are all one. It's not simply a cliché. In some ways, that's a more accurate understanding of how we are and how we fit in the world than the idea that we're just individual particles separated by barriers from everything else. And I think one thing that psychedelics teach, as many other spiritual traditions do, is that we're all one, and that it's an important lesson to learn--especially at this stage. We're not going to save the planet, we're not going to fundamentally change the way that we relate to nature, until we take that lesson, understand it, take it to heart, and try to express it in the way that we live and the

way that we think. Psychedelics teach many lessons, but at this historical juncture I think that this may be the most important one for our culture, and for our society.

I think that back at the end of the 60s, two things did more to change our perspective as a race, as a species--of who we are and what our place in the universe is--than probably anything else previously. One of them was psychedelics. The other one was going to the moon--or, more specifically, that first photograph of the Earth from space. I think that the first time that we were able to look at ourselves, in a sense, from out there and realize what a small planet we are--what a small part of the totality our supposedly very important affairs are--was a very humbling experience. That helped to put us into perspective, or, at least, in sum they did. I really think that those two things were what sparked, or initiated, what we might call eco-consciousness.

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**An Excerpt from *Ayahuasca and Human Destiny***

By Dennis J. McKenna, Ph.D.

On a personal level, ayahuasca has been for me both a scientific and professional continuing carrot, and a plant teacher and guide of incomparable wisdom, compassion, and intelligence. My earliest encounters with ayahuasca were experiential; only later did it become an object of scientific curiosity, sparked in part by a desire to understand the mechanism, the machineries, that might underlie the profound experiences that it elicited.

As a young man just getting started in the field of ethnopharmacology, ayahuasca seemed to me more than worthy of a lifetime of scientific study; and so it has proven to be. Pursuing an understanding of ayahuasca has led to many exotic places that I would never have visited otherwise, from the jungles of the Amazon Basin to the laboratory complexes of the National Institute of Mental Health and Stanford; it has led to the formation of warm friendships and fruitful collaborations with many colleagues who have shared my curiosity about the mysteries of this curious plant complex. These collaborations, and more importantly, these friendships, continue, as does the quest for understanding. Though there have been detours along the way, always, and inevitably, they have led back to the central quest. Often, after the fact, I have seen how those apparent detours were not so far off the path after all, as they supplied some insight, some skill, or some experience, that in hindsight proved necessary to the furtherance of the quest.

Just as ayahuasca has been for me personally something of a Holy Grail, as it has been for many others, I have the intuition that it may have a similar role with respect to our entire species. Anyone who is personally experienced with ayahuasca is aware that it has much to teach us; there is incredible wisdom and intelligence there. And to my mind, one of the most profound and humbling lessons that ayahuasca teaches--one that we thick-headed humans have the hardest time grasping--is the realization that "you monkeys only think you're running things." Though I state it humorously, here and in other talks and writings, it is nonetheless a profound insight on which may depend the very survival of our species, and our planet. Humans are good at nothing if not hubris, arrogance, and self-delusion.

We assume that we dominate nature; that we are somehow separate from, and superior to, nature, even as we set about busily undermining and wrecking the very homeostatic global mechanisms that have kept our Earth stable and hospitable to life for the last four and a half billion years. We devastate the rainforests of the world;

we are responsible for the greatest loss of habitat and the greatest decimation of species since the asteroid impacts of the Permian-Triassic boundary, 250 million years ago; we rip the guts out of the Earth and burn them, spewing toxic chemicals into the atmosphere; at the same time we slash and burn the woody forests that may be the only hope for sequestration of the carbon dioxide that is rapidly building to dangerous and possibly uncontrollable levels.

For the first time in the history of our species, and indeed of our planet, we are forced to confront the possibility that thoughtless and unsustainable human activity may be posing a real threat to our species' survival, and possibly the survival of all life on the planet.

And suddenly, and literally, "out of the Amazon," one of the most impacted parts of our wounded planet, ayahuasca emerges as an emissary of trans-species sentience, to bring this lesson: You monkeys only think you're running things. In a wider sense, the import of this lesson is that we need to wake up to what is happening to us and to the planet. We need to get with the program, people. We have become spiritually bereft and have been seduced by the delusion that we are somehow important in the scheme of things. We are not.

Our spiritual institutions have devolved into hollow shells, perverted to the agendas of rapacious governments and fanatic fundamentalisms, no longer capable of providing balm to the wounded spirit of our species; and as the world goes up in flames we benumb ourselves with consumerism and mindless entertainment, the decadent distractions of gadgets and gewgaws, the frantic but ultimately meaningless pursuits of a civilization that has lost its compass. And at this cusp in human history, there emerges a gentle emissary, the conduit to a body of profoundly ancient genetic and evolutionary wisdom that has long abided in the cosmologies of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon who have guarded and protected this knowledge for millennia, who learned long ago that the human role is not to be the master of nature, but its stewards. Our destiny, if we are to survive, is to nurture nature and to learn from it how to nurture ourselves and our fellow beings. This is the lesson that we can learn from ayahuasca, if only we pay attention.

I find it both ironic, and hopeful, that within the last 150 years, and particularly in the last half of the 20th century, ayahuasca has begun to assert its presence into human awareness on a global scale. For millennia it was known only to indigenous peoples who have long since understood and integrated what it has to teach us. In the 19th century it first came to the attention of a wider

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world as an object of curiosity in the reports of Richard Spruce and other intrepid explorers of the primordial rainforests of South America; in the mid-20th century Schultes and others continued to explore this discovery and began to focus the lens of science on the specifics of its botany, chemistry, and pharmacology (and, while necessary, this narrow scrutiny perhaps overlooked some of the larger implications of this ancient symbiosis with humanity).

At the same time, ayahuasca escaped from its indigenous habitat and made its influence felt among certain non-indigenous people, representatives of “greater” civilization. To these few men and women, ayahuasca provided revelations, and they in turn responded (in the way that humans so often do when confronted with a profound mystery) by founding religious sects with a messianic mission; in this case, a mission of hope, a message to the rest of the world that despite its simplicity was far ahead of its time: that we must learn to become the stewards of nature, and by fostering, encouraging, and sustaining the fecundity and diversity of nature, by celebrating and honoring our place as biological beings, as part of the web of life, we may learn to become nurturers of each other. A message quite different, and quite anathema, to the anti-biological obsessions of most of the major world “religions” with their preoccupation with death and suffering and their insistence on the suppression of all spontaneity and joy.

Such a message is perceived as a great threat by entrenched religious and political power structures, and indeed, it is. It is a threat to the continued rape of nature and oppression of peoples that is the foundation of their power. Evidence that they understand this threat and take it seriously is reflected by the unstinting and brutal efforts that “civilized” ecclesiastical, judicial, and political authorities have made to prohibit, demonize, and exterminate the shamanic use of ayahuasca and other sacred plants ever since the Inquisition and even earlier.

But the story is not yet over. Within the last 30 years, ayahuasca, clever little plant intelligence that it is, has escaped from its ancestral home in the Amazon and has found haven in other parts of the world. With the assistance of human helpers who heard the message and heeded it, ayahuasca sent its tendrils forth to encircle the world. It has found new homes, and new friends, in nearly every part of the world where temperatures are warm and where the ancient connections to plant-spirit still thrive, from the islands of Hawaii to the rainforests of South Africa, from gardens in Florida to greenhouses

in Japan. The forces of death and dominance have been outwitted; it has escaped them, outrun them. There is now no way that ayahuasca can ever be eliminated from the Earth, short of toxifying the entire planet (which, unfortunately, the death culture is working assiduously to accomplish). Even if the Amazon itself is leveled for cattle pasture or burned for charcoal, ayahuasca, at least, will survive, and will continue to engage in its dialog with humanity. And encouragingly, more and more people are listening.

It may be too late. I have no illusions about this. Given that the curtain is now being rung down on the drunken misadventure that we call human history, the death culture will inevitably become even more brutal and insane, flailing ever more violently as it sinks beneath the quick sands of time. Indeed, it is already happening; all you have to do is turn on the nightly news. Will ayahuasca survive?

I have no doubt that ayahuasca will survive on this planet as long as the planet remains able to sustain life. The human time frame is measured in years, sometimes centuries, rarely, in millennia. Mere blinks when measured against the evolutionary time scales of planetary life, the scale on which ayahuasca wields its influence. It will be here long after the governments, religions, and political power structures that seem today so permanent and so menacing have dissolved into dust. It will be here long after our ephemeral species has been reduced to anomalous sediment in the fossil record. The real question is, will we be here long enough to hear its message, to integrate what it is trying to tell us, and to change in response, before it is too late? Ayahuasca has the same message for us now that it has always had, since the beginning of its symbiotic relationship with humanity. Are we willing to listen? Only time will tell. •

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