

Psychedelics Can Serve as Catalyst for Deep Ecological Consciousness



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Perched atop a log in the forest no more than a half-mile from my home, I decided to take a walk. Traipsing down the winding but well-manicured path back to the open meadow prefacing the forest's entry it was impossible not to notice what a glorious day it was: the sun beamed radiant, birds recited an infinite chorus, the tops of towering redwoods swayed tenderly in the wind, and somebody was singing.

How odd, I thought, why would somebody be singing on a Saturday morning at the forest's entrance?

I stopped and listened intently. The words being sung were impossible to decipher, but they wafted through the air with an entrancing lyrical beauty. I looked around, but failed to spot the source. A few more steps through the meadow—ears perked, eyes scanning, still nothing. Then, I stopped walking, peered down as if on command, and saw the small creek gurgling beside me. The song melded with the sound of the water until they were one harmonious tone broadcasting the poetry of the unified totality of nature.

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Why I should daily walk down the street outside my home and not feel intimately connected and wholly enamored with each blade of grass, every blackberry bush and each inch of soil is difficult to understand. After all, I have read a miniature library worth of books concerning the deep ecology philosophy and environmental psychology. I have studied the sense of place phenomenon, examining why and how people feel connected to the Earth. I have read The Upanishads and tried to understand quantum physics, both offering the notion of singular unity—the inescapable interconnection of all entities. And yet, it was eating three grams of tiny brown mushrooms collected at a beach dune just a few miles from my front door that facilitated my feeling intimately and wholly bound up with the natural world.

“Anyone can sweep up around the ashram for a dozen years while congratulating themselves that they are following a path to enlightenment,” Terrence McKenna once told an interviewer. “It takes courage to take psychedelics—real courage. Your stomach clenches, your palms grow damp, because you realize that this is real—this is going to work. Not in 12 years, not in 20 years, but in an hour!”

It is precisely the immediacy of psychedelics McKenna notes, coupled with their ability to catalyze and facilitate experiences of a transpersonal nature, which makes them a fascinating area of study in terms of the relationship between human beings and what we commonly refer to as the environment. As my own experience in the forest illustrates, psychedelics have the potential to alter human perceptions of the natural world and consequently

transform humanity's relationship with the environment.

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess coined the term deep ecology when in 1972 he delivered a lecture titled "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement." Naess's goal was to establish a movement grounded in personal exploration and deep questioning about the most basic tenets of what it means to be a human being in a world of nonhuman beings. Naess's deep ecology philosophy is a way of thinking about the world, relating to it and interacting with it. As such, it employs two primary principles or ultimate norms: self-realization and biocentric equality. By self-realization, Naess does not refer to narrow, ego-realization in the traditional Western sense of the term, but rather to a realization of the self within a greater self; or, the self within and contained by the Self. The principle of biocentric equality espouses that all entities on Earth possess intrinsic worth, moving away from notions of anthropocentrism or human chauvinism.

The philosopher and ethicist Warwick Fox refined Naess's framework in his 1995 book *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, concluding that Naess's fundamental notion of deep ecology is best articulated as a transpersonal ecology wherein human beings realize identification and unity with the natural world via transpersonal experience. Identification and unity are achieved during a transpersonal experience, Fox says, by maintaining as expansive a sense of self as possible. This expansive sense of self goes beyond one's egoic or biographical sense of self to encompass all entities on Earth, thus forming a definition of self that includes rivers, grasses, gophers, other humans, mountains, trees, banana slugs and the whole lot of the natural world. Barring a desire for self destruction, human beings who are able to realize the unified totality of nature and extend their sense of self to include all entities on the Earth as Fox and Naess suggest, are much less likely to be complicit in its exploitation and ruination.

So, if one were to maintain as expansive a sense of self as possible during a transpersonal experience with the goal of realizing a deep or transpersonal ecology,

could psychedelics serve as a catalyst or facilitating agent? It is indeed the case that a deep or transpersonal ecology is an altered state of consciousness and psychedelics indeed have the ability to very quickly facilitate an altered state of consciousness with an exceptionally high degree of efficacy. It stands to reason then, that those with the intentioned desire to achieve a deep or transpersonal ecological consciousness could benefit from the use of psychedelics as catalyzing agents that facilitate transpersonal experiences and enable one to more readily maintain as expansive a sense of self as possible.

There is no shortcut to achieving a deep or transpersonal ecological consciousness. While psychedelics consistently and expeditiously catalyze transpersonal experiences, during which one can harbor as expansive a sense of self as possible, with the desire of realizing a deep ecological consciousness, simply ingesting a psychedelic and sitting in a forest awaiting inspiration is unlikely to affect a permanent alteration in one's relationship with the environment. A deep or transpersonal ecological consciousness is arrived at through long contemplation and repeated experiences with the natural world—like walking beside a gurgling creek in a forest—a point Naess returns to again and again in his writing. It is the potential for psychedelics to facilitate these contemplations and experiences leading to the realization of a deep ecological consciousness that is especially fascinating and warrants further study. •

David Lawlor earned his M.A. in Social Science with an emphasis in Environment and Community in 2008 from Humboldt State University in Arcata, CA. His master's thesis is available online and titled "The Prospect of Psychedelic Use as a Tool in Realizing a Transpersonal Ecology." He lives in Arcata, Calif. where he works as a writer and editor.

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