

## Accessing **Ecoconsciousness:** The Potential Role of Psychedelics



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**When a Native American child is ready** to enter adulthood, he is sent into the wilderness on a vision quest to connect with spirit, seek answers to problems on the physical realm, and learn his direction in life. He spends days attempting to induce altered states of awareness through fasting, chanting, meditation, and very often the ingestion of psychedelics. He returns feeling freed from the fear of death with a new understanding of the natural form of all things, a sense of personal purpose, divine realization, and a heightened awareness of the four elements and ecological relationships. This is one of many forms of rites of passage performed in indigenous traditions using the aid of hallucinogens to perform healing, gain insight into complex situations, and obtain guidance for moving through life transitions.

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Through thousands of years of working with sacred plant medicine, the indigenous have found numerous benefits through inducing altered states, including the healing of emotional and physical ailments, gaining knowledge from animal and plant guides, communicating with nature and spirits, and increasing inner states of peace and balance. When the shamans are faced with difficult problems such as widespread drought or the necessity to make decisions in times of war, they consult the natural intelligence which has been inscribed in the surrounding ecology over millions of years. For the American Indians sacred knowledge is accessed through peyote, for the Amazonians through ayahuasca, for the Africans Iboga, for the Mesoamericans psilocybin mushrooms, and for the Andean Indians San Pedro. Throughout the world the use of psychedelics has been documented in ancient traditions, from Buddhism to Mayan tradition.

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ing a sense of inner purpose. Lacking a guide through the transition from childhood to adulthood, adolescents increasingly feel lost, constantly searching for a personal mission and wondering what they want to do with their lives. One in five teens now experiences depression, accompanied by feelings of apathy and purposelessness. The absence of opportunities to learn from nature impacts us at all stages of life, depriving us of the benefits of natural therapy, deep understandings, and increased inner peace.

In addition to the shift in cultural perceptions of how we relate to nature, we are impacted by the geographical shift away from the wilderness and into cities. While today fifty percent of our global population lives in the urban environment, the United Nations estimates ninety percent of future population growth will be concentrated in cities. Megacities are exponentially growing in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, with the equivalent of a new Los Angeles predicted to appear every three months over the next 25 years. With the onslaught of rapid urbanization, how can we

attempt to stay connected to nature and have access to the wealth of knowledge it provides? Without exposure to the natural environment we lose our understanding of deep interconnection, awareness of a common thread, and a sense of responsibility and care for the planet.

It is generally accepted that our current state of ecological crisis is a direct result of this growing lack of interconnection with, and resulting apathy for, our surrounding environment. Even with recent victories over apathy through increased awareness, beyond awareness there is a growing need for action. And there is something significant to be said for 'right action', as the modern solutions of ecological control and domination through science and technology do not seem to be rectifying the situation. More vital than scientific understanding of the looming global crisis is the drastic need for environmental stewards to change it.

Many types of ecological philosophy, such as deep ecology and transpersonal ecology, discuss this conundrum, proposing that facts and logic alone cannot enlighten us on how to integrate with nature: ecological wisdom must come through 'deep experience, deep questioning, and deep commitment'. The core belief of deep ecology is that the biosphere will not flourish alongside humans unless we regain an ecocentric perspective and recognize our symbiotic relationship with the Earth. This occurs through a dissolving of boundaries between self and nature, and the realization that humans are a part of the environment, rather than separate from it. This is supported by the findings of the Nature Inclusive Measure (N.I.M.), developed by St. John and MacDonald (2007) to assess the effects of a "nature inclusive self concept" on the ecopsychological self.

St. John and MacDonald found a significant correlation between a person's degree of nature inclusiveness, mental well-being, spiritual well-being, and an expanded self-boundary, showing that those who identify with or feel "at one with nature" scored higher on particular scales measuring these attributes. Moreover, they discovered a second factor of "nature stewardship," based on a person's active pro-environmental behavior such as participation in environmental organizations, clean-up, and recycling, emerged to also be highly correlated with the nature inclusiveness measure. It seems that transcending a restricted sense of personal boundaries to include nature and the surrounding environment not only enhances a sense of psychological well-being, but also increases the likelihood of a person to actively participate as a caretaker of the Earth. The question that remains is how can we achieve this sense of expanded boundaries? With our increasing separation from nature, where do we find the 'deep experience' that leads to self-realization, eco-consciousness, and recognition of an interconnected state of being?

Psychedelics perhaps offer the opportunity to regain that connection with nature and act as a conduit for

communicating with plant spirit, even when the physical access to the environment is unavailable in the densely packed urban world. In addition to the nature-orientated experience commonly reported by users of psychedelics--such as interactions with plant, rock, and tree personalities, encounters with spirit animals, and the recurring presence of the fractal patterns of nature--studies have shown that use of psychedelics is connected with a long-term sense of expanded self-awareness, dissolving of boundaries, concern for others, and concern for the environment. In a MAPS-funded study, Lerner and Lyvers (2006) compared the values and beliefs of psychedelic drug users with those of non-users, as well as users of non-psychedelic illegal drugs (e.g. marijuana, amphetamines). They found that users of psychedelics had an increased sense of oneness with God and universe (expanded self boundaries), as well as increased concern for the environment, empathy, creativity, and ability to cope with stress. I would conjecture that if psychedelic users were evaluated on the scales used with the N.I.M. study, we would see similar correlations to the use of psychedelics as were seen with a nature inclusive self-concept.

The psychedelic users and nature-inclusive self-identifiers of both studies were found to hold similar values, such as respect and care for the environment, empathy for other living beings, expanded self-awareness, increased sense of spirituality, and sense of intrinsic well-being. Following the belief that those with similar values would likely follow similar action, psychedelic users with expanded self-boundaries are likely to exhibit the qualities of active Earth stewardship. Indeed, it is common to see individuals return from a vision quest or psychedelic journey with an increased affinity for nature, belief in animism, and desire to care for the Earth. They often feel they have been gifted with a new level of understanding, ancient wisdom, and clarity in purpose, and feel empowered to act in accordance with this new way of being.

By embracing the ancient use of hallucinogenic substances as a valuable way to access a part of ourselves that is able to communicate with nature, perhaps we can continue to gain the gifts of wisdom and insights provided by the natural environment even without the ability to be constantly immersed in it. We have seen an increasing emergence of spiritual groups from within the urban environment, such as the Santo Daime, healing collectives, urban-based vision quests, and other communal groups seeking to access the elements of nature that provide insight and healing. There is no doubt that with the increasing population, destruction of nature, and loss of valuable habitat, there is great necessity to reconnect with a deeper sense of purpose and to reinforce the importance of caring for our environment. By finding ways to access the eco-consciousness, inner consciousness, or superconsciousness, we can become better stewards of the Earth and learn to heal the surrounding ecosystem while healing ourselves. •