

The Birth of the Canadian Ecopsychology Network

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Those of us involved with ecopsychology are widely dispersed around the planet, with special pockets of interest in far-flung places like the American West, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Europe. Gradually, through our peer-reviewed journal and various professional groups, we are finding each other and becoming a more-or-less coherent community, but we have a long way to go. This article tells the story of one such effort, in hopes of inspiring others to tell their tales as well.

When Canadian graduate student Carol Koziol first considered and embraced the idea of forming a group to bring together those of her compatriots who shared her interest in ecopsychology and ecotherapy, a major concern was the huge size of Canada—a geographically larger land mass than the United States, with approximately the population of California, spread out from the Atlantic to the Pacific. How would it be possible to create any sense of community in such a huge country? How would people be able to gather without huge fiscal costs and carbon footprints? Even though this interest arose at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara, California, Carol's graduate fieldwork advisor Linda Buzzell, born and raised near Montreal and a McGill graduate, fully supported her efforts to solve these problems and become the founder of the Canadian Ecopsychology Network (CEN). No such organization existed when Carol undertook this task in 2015.

Technology has many downsides (Kahn, Severson, & Ruckert, 2009), but one benefit is that we live in an era when online communication is beginning to provide economical and increasingly user-friendly methods of interacting across vast distances. Carol experimented with Facebook and Zoom technologies, first forming what became an active Facebook group (membership by application)

for CEN and then scheduling monthly “virtual gatherings” and presentations on the relatively inexpensive and user-friendly Zoom platform.

Facebook has proven to be a highly versatile tool, although of course some potential CEN members don't have access to computer technology or choose not to be on a platform such as this. But CEN decided to go forward with setting up a Facebook group, as it could be created instantly and for zero financial cost. Many potential members were already familiar with using Facebook, and events could easily be announced and promoted. The news of the formation of CEN's Facebook page was spread in existing ecopsychology-related Facebook, LinkedIn, and Google groups, and Carol monitored applicants for inclusion. Many of the 198+ members are Canadian, but others are welcome as well. To date, there is no cost for membership in CEN.

This kind of user-friendly Facebook group makes “chat” easy for those with access to a cell phone or computer, even for the technically challenged among us. People can share links to useful articles and events, plus photos or videos. *Ecopsychology* journal articles are sometimes cited or recommended. Items with specific Canadian interest are the focus, but general items are posted as well. Discussion and real dialogue take place.

Three months after the Facebook group began, on January 21, 2016, a virtual meet and greet on the easy-to-use Zoom platform was held for people to network and share what they would like from the group. This resulted in the membership expressing an interest in gathering virtually the third Thursday of every month. CEN's first formal gathering was on February 18, 2016, with Linda Buzzell, coeditor with Craig Chalquist (2009) of *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind*, speaking on the relationship between ecopsychology and ecotherapy. Carol is the main host and moderator. She has created a format that has been followed in most subsequent gatherings: first a “gathering in” reading or meditation led by one of the participants; then a short speaker presentation, usually with accompanying illustrations of some kind, which is recorded; followed by a nonrecorded discussion among those attending. The recorded presentation is posted on Vimeo after each event and

promoted on the CEN Facebook group and other online ecopsychology groups so those who couldn't attend "live" can enjoy and learn from the speaker afterward.

Many of us have now experienced this kind of online conference platform. Of course it's not as intimate as being in the same physical place, and we lose that nature connection (ecopsychologists who have expressed concern over the relationship between technology and ecopsychology include Kahn and Hasbach [2012] and Fisher [2013]), but we have found that as people become adjusted to seeing each other live on screen and chatting verbally and through the written "chat" function, real relationships can evolve as we get to know each other. Also, using a low-cost format allows many to participate who otherwise might be ecologically reluctant or unable to pay for expensive air travel, conference fees, or hotel accommodation. It's a trade-off.

From the beginning, Carol made the decision to invite some of those attending to give future presentations, and we have heard excellent talks by Vancouver Island's John Scull, one of ecopsychology's pioneers and a founder of the online International Community for Ecopsychology, on nature-connection workshops; Andy Fisher from Ontario, author of *Radical Ecopsychology* (2013); Pegi Evers, author of *Ancient Spirit Rising* (2015); Alex Thomson on invasive species; Melissa Clews-Hunt on ecotherapy; Sally Ludwig on ecotrauma and resilience; Eric Windhorst (2016) on remembering ecological self; Marcia Alexander on the wild archetypal feminine; and death doula Sarah Kerr.

Carol's decision to focus on this kind of inclusion was influenced by her research into what Kraut and Resnick (2011) identified as some of the characteristics of online communities. "To be successful, online communities need the people who participate in them to contribute the resources on which the group's existence is built" (p. 21). In addition to the inclusive practices mentioned above, CEN members are also invited to share articles and ideas on Facebook. Social psychologists who study groups distinguish between two bases for group commitment: "Identity-based affective commitment is a feeling of being part of the community and helping to fulfill its mission. In contrast, bond-based affective commitment is feeling close to individual members of the group" (p. 79). Reflecting on these two types of commitments, CEN has shown evidence of both.

An issue of great interest to us both has been the exploration of what might be unique and different about ecopsychology as understood and practiced in Canada. Turtle Island First Nations of the north, as CEN member and author Pegi Evers points out, must be our primary authorities and teachers in this regard. Even the Settlers' "Canadian psyche" has been deeply influenced by the land, waters,

and ancestors of the Great White North, in ways that are subtly different culturally from those experienced in the United States. The whole issue of what is the "Canadian psyche" is endlessly debated in Canada (Foster 2016; Harding, 2007; Parliament of Canada, n.d.) and mostly ignored in the United States, perhaps because European-descent Canadians did not participate in the 1776 revolution further south and remained part of the British Empire until quite recently.

Canadian settlers were living in a topographical reality that prevented individuals from challenging limits and frontiers: in the vast north of Canada, the Great Canadian Shield, that topographical feature of wild and frozen tundra, prevents individuals from acting independently on their own, and does not nurture the valuing of overcoming limits and frontiers. In fact, in Canada, limits and barriers are to be respected, for there is no overcoming them easily. (Foster, 2016, p. 4)

One thing is certain: For most Canadians, nature is not something that can be taken for granted or ignored. As in other Arctic and sub-Arctic lands, each winter day presents both real survival challenges and incredible beauty. Those who don't learn nature's ways can find themselves lost in a blinding blizzard, as Linda's family did when she was a child. They were rescued by a kind French-Canadian farmer who, although he had good reason to resent his English-speaking neighbors, also understood how easily and quickly we could have perished. Looking out for each other has, until recent mass urbanization, been understood as a necessity for survival. "Don't mess with Mother Nature!" isn't just a clever quip in the serious north, as our Inuit, Cree, and other First Nations people have been trying to tell Settlers. We worry that as Canada continues to urbanize, with most of its population huddling along the US border, this respect for nature's power may diminish. But those of us who love and cherish the rest of nature hope that this special Canadian connection with nature will persist and grow.

Carol chose a very Canadian topic as the focus of the December 2016 online gathering by inviting five speakers to address the human psyche's relationship with snow. This event turned into one of our most active and emotional discussions, as people shared photos and memories of beloved places, people, plants, and animals enveloped in beautiful white snowflakes.

In her master's report, Carol wrote:

This fieldwork enabled a wonderful opportunity for me to more deeply dive into my identity as a Canadian and acknowledge how our vast landscape has historically shaped, and continues to shape, our culture. Canadians do talk about the weather a lot, because our

psyche is inextricably tied to surviving in our meteorologically challenging, sparsely populated and geographically diverse nation. The creation of CEN was an easily organized and productive way to virtually relate with like-minded nature-connected people. (Koziol, 2016, p. 24)

Carol quotes another Canadian, Andy Fisher (2013), who “clearly speaks this language as a Canadian by writing ‘As an ecopsychologist, I can now say with equal confidence that all people need to experience themselves as a part of the natural world, need to understand their own naturalness’ [p. 193].” Fisher’s proposed model for ecopsychology suggests an integration of psyche, nature, and society that feels quite Canadian. He writes “Ecopsychology ... needs to think more like a social movement than an academic discipline” (p. 239). In our work of birthing CEN, we have been inspired by these words from Fisher: “The more we can, as ecopsychologists, build our alternative vision of humans and nature, the bolder we will become in encouraging others to speak out for a society that is consistent with this vision” (p. 193).

Carol suggests that Andy’s approach is indicative of a Canadian cultural trait: the focus on *community*. “A compassionate Canada was carved out from a history of harsh survival and this legacy has created a society of universal health care, social welfare, and regional equalization” (Koziol, 2016, p. 15). We also have a hybrid history including French, British, and American influences. With two official languages, a continually changing cultural diversity, and the acknowledgement of and ongoing reconciliation with First Nations, Canada is culturally distinct from many other harsh northern countries.

Based on the interactions of CEN’s membership and the literature review Carol did, she

would boldly suggest that to some degree, all Canadians are ecopsychologists because our relationship to community and to the land has been invisibly integrated into all aspects of our history and culture. Those of us that remember must help the rest who do not. (2016, p. 25)

In 2017, CEN is continuing its monthly gatherings and has initiated a new series of video interviews with noted ecopsychology thought leaders from around the globe, called “Ecopsychology Voices.” Renee Lertzman, author of *Environmental Melancholia* (2015), was our inaugural speaker on February 1.

It is CEN’s hope that Canadians, by nature a rather temperate and diplomatic (some say *too* polite) people, can provide an open and welcoming community for global discussion of many issues in ecopsychology. Our country, caught geographically and culturally between

its noisy neighbor to the South and the Europe from which many of its Settlers have arrived, has often been seen internationally as a kind of neutral nation where reasoned dialogue hopefully prevails. Even our “Quiet Revolution” in Quebec was, well, fairly polite if also passionate. And the ongoing conversations between First Nations, Anglophone and Francophone Settlers, and new immigrants tend to continue in a more civilized register than the loud shouting in Trump’s America. For these and other reasons, hopefully the ecopsychology world will find us to be a useful member of the global community.

Our goal in sharing this report on how CEN has been founded and continues to grow is to address the wider issue of how we and others around the world can and are creating a more active ecopsychology community in various geographical locations and globally. *Vital Signs: Psychological Responses to Ecological Crisis* (2012), edited by Mary-Jayne Rust and Nick Totton, is a wonderful expression of the evolving ecopsychological community in the United Kingdom. The European Ecopsychology Society is another initiative of great interest. Surely all these explorations of community creation are needed if our field is to survive and ultimately evolve and influence the many cultures around the world in which renewed interest in the health or dysfunction of the human-nature relationship is arising.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

- Canadian Ecopsychology Network, <http://www.facebook.com/groups/CanadianEcopsychologyNetwork>
- Ecopsychology UK, <http://www.ecopsychology.org.uk>. There is also a UK Ecopsychology NING website for online networking, events, and discussion forums. Its goal is "Connection with the planet and with each other."
- Ecopsychology Voices, Renee Lertzman interview by Linda Buzzell and Carol Koziol, <https://vimeo.com/202142979>
- European Ecopsychology Society, <http://www.ecopsychology.net>
- Facebook groups: "Ecotherapy Network," "Ecotherapy," "Ecopsychology," "Ecopsychology Network of Southern California"
- International Association for Ecotherapy: Google group ("Ecotherapy Association") and Facebook group ("Ecotherapy Network") www.ecotherapyheals.com

International Community for Ecopsychology (ICE), www.ecopsychology.org, publishes *Gatherings*, an online journal.

LinkedIn. Numerous groups if you search for "ecopsychology" and "ecotherapy"

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Received: January 2, 2017

Accepted: April 13, 2017