

PROFOUND TIES: NATURE- ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY- EDUCATION

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Abstract

Over the past four decades, the increasing interest in nature and environment protection has raised many scientific, social, philosophical and psychological problems. Psychologists proved that positive attitudes and selfless nature-conserving actions are far more likely to be generated by personal experiences, instead of the so-called “second hand” information provided by the mass-media or the experts in this particular field. Over the last 13 years, at the beginning of every academic year, we have been unconventionally trying to get to know the students participating in the courses and seminars provided over a two-year period by the Environmental Geography specialization, within the Faculty of Geography of the University of Bucharest. The first Environmental Pollution course is dedicated to a free and open discussion about the motivation behind choosing this particular specialization, what sparked the interest and concern for the environment, as well as the students’ love for nature. Looking at the responses received from hundreds of students (on average, 80-100 students choose to study each year Environmental Geography) over the past 13 years, we reached the conclusion that there are several major factors involved in converting people into nature lovers and passionate nature problem-solving militants. These factors act mainly during childhood and adolescence, with a significantly lower influence in adulthood.

Keywords: Environmental psychology, education, students, nature

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past four decades, the increasing interest in nature and environment protection has raised many scientific, social, philosophical and psychological problems.

The philosophical problems included questions on the values people should attach to the environment and the importance of these values (Lovelock, 1979). Thus, a new field of philosophy was introduced in the 70’s, which revolved around the study of environmental ethical principles and was named “environmental ethics”. Meanwhile, psychologists found that all environment-related issues had a common starting point – the mindset. As a result, a new psychology field emerged – environmental psychology – covering the relationship between people and the environment, officially recognized in the USA in 1970.

Therefore, it is obvious that solutions must be found for the numerous forms of pollution, for restoring certain ecosystems affected by the anthropic impact and for many other environmental issues. Still, before taking on any of these tasks, we must analyze our attitude, our beliefs and our trail of thought when it comes to nature and the environment (Lovelock, 1979; Soran, Borcea, 1985; Vlavianos-Arvanitis, Oleskin, 1992)).

Human consciousness is multifaceted and whenever one of these facets is negated or insufficiently cultivated and developed, it will lead to manifestations of rejection, fear, hatred or anger. This is also the case for the man’s alienation from nature, which results in a negative anthropic impact over the environment, manifested through destruction, pollution and a fear of nature.

Although over the last few decades the interest in environmental problems has grown in many countries, it was not due to direct personal experiences.

Today, television and various publications provide vast amounts of information on environmental

problems, but the interest in these issues only sparks during certain crisis situations, such as accidents – and given the fact that their interest is not profound, people only concern themselves with these matters for short periods of time.

Psychologists proved that positive attitudes and selfless nature-conserving actions are far more likely to be generated by personal experiences, instead of the so-called “second hand” information provided by the mass-media or the experts in this particular field.

Psychology has also proven that the fear of nature, of the wild, is rooted in people’s ignorance; another problem which psychology helped identify is people’s tendency to drift away from themselves, which affects many individuals; if one were to be left alone in an isolated outdoors spot such as a forest, without books, mobile phone or other sources of distraction for 3-4 hours, that person will begin to think deeper about himself, his purpose in life and his existence on Earth.

Swiss psychologist Maria von Franz (1915-1998) introduced in 1974 the theory that the fear of being alone in the outdoors actually represents the fear of revealing one’s true self, along with one’s hidden and sometimes “dark” traits (Swan, 1993). A special contribution in environmental psychology was brought by the American Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), who showed that modern psychology was based on the study of lab animals or people with mental disabilities, underlining the fact that there was no branch in psychology dealing with perfectly healthy people (Swan, 1993)! He began to study people in excellent physical and mental health and discovered that they all felt a powerful attraction for nature.

2. AIMS AND METHOD

This paper represents the first step in identifying and analyzing the motivation behind the love for nature and the interest and concern for the environment, conducted in the Environmental Geography program, at the Faculty of Geography of the University of Bucharest. The analysis is based on the data and observations collected over the past 13 years. The study had 3 main objectives:

- to identify the major factors involved in converting people into nature lovers and passionate nature problem-solving militants;
- to identify when these factors do act in a human life;
- to find educational solutions in order to live in harmony with nature, both in childhood and adulthood.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Over the past 13 years, at the beginning of every academic year, we have been unconventionally trying to get to know the students enrolled in our two-year Environmental Geography program, at the Faculty of Geography of the University of Bucharest.

Therefore, the first Environmental Pollution course is dedicated to a free and open discussion about the motivation behind choosing this particular specialization, what sparked the interest and concern for the environment, as well as the students’ love for nature.

Looking at the responses received from hundreds of students (each year, approximately 80-100 students choose to study Environmental Geography) over the past 13 years, we reached the conclusion that there are several major factors involved in converting people into nature lovers and passionate nature problem-solving militants. These factors act mainly during childhood and adolescence, with a significantly lower influence in adulthood.

These are the most important factors:

A. Positive emotional childhood experiences in the outdoors. In other words, a childhood spent in nature, in exceptionally beautiful places, leads to a teenager and, later on, to an adult actively involved in solving environmental problems. In fact, James Swan, an American psychologist drawn to the field of environmental psychology, studied for over 20 years the emergence and development of the interest and love for nature and the environment, by analyzing the personalities working in the field of nature conservation (Swan, 1993); his conclusions were the same – the positive childhood emotions represent an important factor in the character build-up of a future adult, in terms of caring for nature and the environment. Swan mentions the case of American biologist Rachel Carson (1907-1964), known for his “The Sense of Wonder” and “Silent Spring” releases. She was a sensitive child who spent most of his childhood in the outdoors, in exceptionally beautiful nature spots, experiences which were later reflected in her work and beliefs.

Most of the students taking on environmental studies come from rural areas or small towns, places where pollution is not an issue and where nature plays an essential role. Many of them have been hiking since childhood, learning to respect nature and to pay attention to its important life lessons. The communion between nature and child helps form a responsible adult, passionate about the environment.

B. Personal health problems caused by a mainly-urban polluted environment, cured with the help of natural products.

Many of the students arriving in Bucharest deal with health problems, especially respiratory diseases, which are caused by the high pollutant concentrations of the city's air. These problems are reduced or even disappear as soon as the young people return to their clean native lands, where nature's "prescriptions" heal them on the spot.

C. A strong character, marked by a concern for social justice, ethics and respect for life in all its forms.

Some of our Environmental Geography students have been involved in environmental NGO's since their freshmen year or even as far back as high-school, being outraged by the effects of the so-called civilization over the environment and the people's health, over the living conditions in those countries where their resources are barbarously exploited, over animals and so on. Some of the students are vegetarians or even vegans, looking to reduce their environmental footprint.

D. Deep psychological experiences of spiritual nature.

Nowadays, people get nervous and anxious whenever they have to talk about their spiritual experiences. The famous Romanian historian of religion, writer and philosopher Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) (Fig.1) said that once someone has lived a mystical or spiritual experience, that person's life will be forever changed and one of the frequently occurring consequences is the awareness of nature's spiritual dimension (Eliade, 1991).

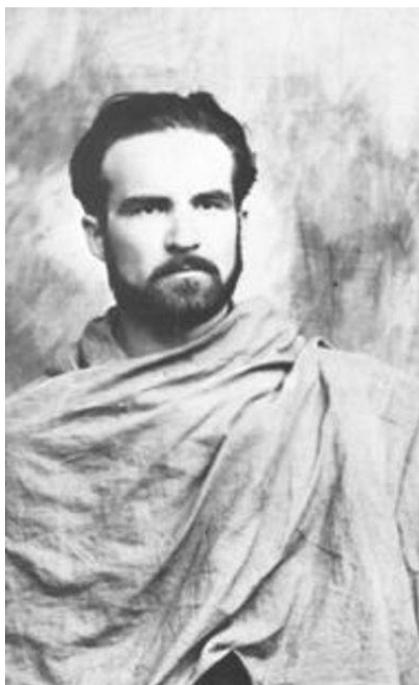


Fig. 1. Mircea Eliade

Many nature defenders have lived such mystical experiences, which are often associated with visiting a special outdoor spot. Swan mentions Stapp and Pinchot (Swan, 1993), but we can augment these examples with the students' discrete testimonials, as they have understood the beauty and complexity of this world in the light of their nature adventures, which cannot be easily put into words.

The first director of the UNESCO Environmental Education Office, William Stapp, became an ardent defender of nature and natural resources as a result of an experience he had during a college biology course (Swan, 1993). He used to be less than enthusiastic about nature and much more concerned with becoming a wrestling national champion. During a biology course, Stapp and his colleagues went on a field trip to

analyze the life forms from a reflux-created swamp. As he was entering deeper and deeper into the swamp, he felt a sudden sensation of amazement and a feeling of awe and admiration for the beauty and complexity of the numerous creatures which were before him for the first time. At that point he realized that all things and beings are interconnected, and then entered a state of rapture, ecstasy and joyful bliss. He was so caught up by the intensity of these sensations that he almost drowned in the sly unperceivably-growing stream. This experience changed his entire life. After a few months he moved to another college and began to passionately study biology and natural resources. Later on, he established the first Environmental Education Office of UNESCO.

The word “conservation” also comes from a transcendental experience (Swan, 1993).

One morning in February 1905, Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946), Head of the Forestry Administration under President Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), was riding through Washington’s Rock Creek Park. He was very preoccupied about the development of a long-term governmental policy which would best describe the optimal management of all natural resource uses. All of a sudden, he entered a trance and at the end of a long tunnel of light he saw a territory of India called “conservancies”, which he recognized as being used for the common benefit of the population. The words “the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time” came to him spontaneously and he swiftly returned to the White House to describe his experience to President Roosevelt, who, that very evening convened a Cabinet meeting to discuss Pinchot’s experience. One of the State Secretaries “chiselled” the definition of natural resources management policy: “the rational use of natural resources, for the best use of the largest possible number of citizens over the longest possible period of time”. Doesn’t it look a lot like the concept for “sustainable development”? And this happened in 1905!

The information presented so far shows that psychological motivation at young ages is the most important ingredient in the cultivation and development of profound nature loving feelings.

In their work, Abraham Maslow (American psychologist, 1908-1970) and Carl Jung (Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist, 1875-1961) have shown that mind and nature form a “whole” deep within all human beings. When mind and nature are “isomorphic”, only then can we truly grasp the concept of belonging to a large family which includes the stars, rivers, mountains, forests, flowers, birds, mammals, fish, reptiles and so on, with us, them and everything in between interconnected through deep unions (Leopold, 1966).

When it comes to family, we often use the word “kinship”. Anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson believes that, in this respect, we should consider nature our “next of kin”.

The Indian culture understood best the fact that the human being is a fully-integrated element of nature. The Indian philosophical and religious trends have deepened the relationship between man and nature to a degree unmatched by any other culture. Hindus believe that plants, animals and people are beings made out of the same material and spiritual essence, all of them harmonizing to the great universal vibration. Contemporary biology has confirmed what the Hindus have intuitively known for thousands of years.

In Indian philosophy, the fundamental ethical precept is known as “ahimsa”, which means non-violence or in a broader sense, encompassing love. Literally, the word “ahimsa” (Sanskrit language) means “to not kill”. “Ahimsa” demands that man must respect all life forms. According to the “ahimsa” rule of conduct, man does not have the right to take a life, unless there is a capital reason for it. He is not allowed to disturb the intrinsic order of nature. The people following this rule believe that any creature has the same right to live as they do and display loving feelings for all beings.

The difference between European and Oriental philosophies and cultures, in terms of the “nature”-concept analysis, is best described by the poet-prophet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) (Fig. 2) in his paper “Sadhana or the Path to Completion”. Here are some of his thoughts (Tagore, 1922):

“The culture of ancient Greece grew behind the city walls. All modern cultures have a cradle of stone and cement. These walls leave deep scars within the human spirit... Our culture was born in the great virgin forests of India. Surrounded by the vast and divers life of the wild, our people were fed and covered by nature, they connected and merged with all of its ever-changing facets.”

Through his worldwide pilgrimage and dissertations, Tagore urged people to: “return to nature and to recognize in it the supreme harmony that can help improve their lives; the return to the pure feeling of one’s spiritual connection to everything that surrounds us”.

In other words, if we wish to reach a mental state which will allow us to live in harmony with nature, then we must rediscover its voice, which speaks to us in our dreams, visions, moments of peace and communion

or when we are alone in the outdoors.

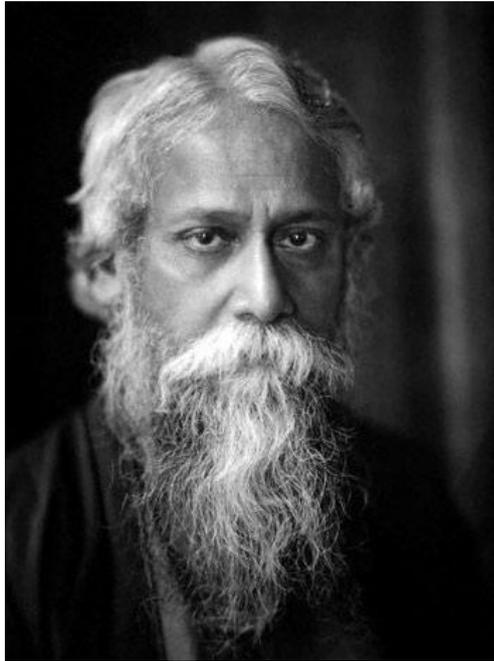


Fig. 2. Rabindranath Tagore

During a discussion with Mircea Eliade, in March 1930 at Shantiniketan (Fig. 3), Tagore said these words of wisdom (Tagore, 1922):

“...I tried myself (...) to integrate school education in the great duty of man: the knowing of self and the love for nature. These two instincts, which I consider to be the great duties of a full life, are completely ignored by European education. You all begin to know nature only after you have killed it, wrapped it up in a museum and sterilized it in a test tube.”

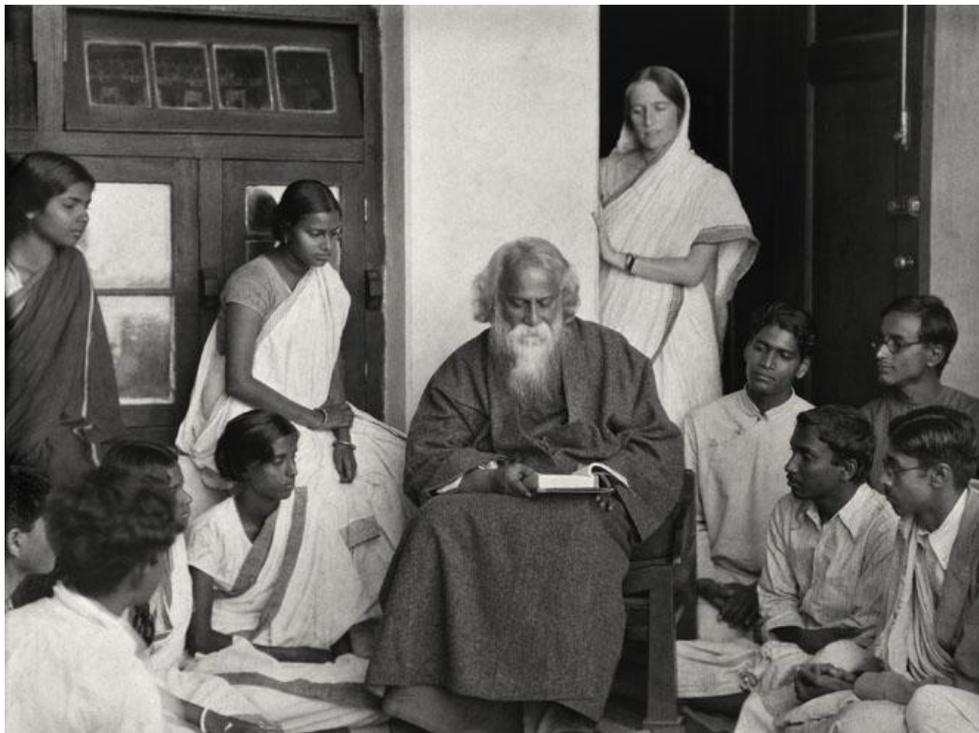


Fig. 3. Tagore and his students in Shantiniketan

4. CONCLUSIONS

In order for us to “return” to nature, we have to make changes within and around ourselves, but the first thing that has to be done involves certain changes in education. Carl Jung points out that man has four main functions: thinking, sensitivity, common sense and intuition. Elementary schools, high-schools and universities focus almost exclusively on the thinking process, neglecting the other three functions and as a result, many adults end up in psychotherapy.

Recent studies have shown that people possess at least seven different types of intelligence: logical-mathematical, musical, kinaesthetic, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal. If all educational institutions would be able to recognize these functions and intelligence types and develop educational programs that would integrate them, then surely we would meet a lot more happy people at peace with themselves. Aside from the subjects requiring reading, writing and mathematics, a holistic curriculum should also include the children’s participation to outdoor activities, the development of creative imagination, skill and physical development, dexterity improvement and the understanding of their special and unique relationship with nature.

The conclusion is that we must live in harmony with NATURE – our family! We must understand that every place on Earth’s surface is unique and special, and the more aware we become of it, the more peace and beauty we will find in our lives!

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- http://elveldharmonia.blogspot.ro/2011_06_01_archive.html (Fig. 1 source)
- <http://www.biographyonline.net/poets/tagore-rabindranath.html> (Fig. 2 source)
- <http://www.cgu.edu/pages/4546.asp?item=5837> (Fig. 3 source)