



THE ROLE OF ECOPSYCHOLOGY IN THE SPIRITUAL EDUCATION OF STUDENT YOUTH

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Abstract. *The article analyzes the potential of ecopsychology as a theoretical and practical resource for the spiritual and moral education of university students. The origins of ecopsychology in the works of Theodore Roszak and related authors are considered, and its central ideas about the psychological unity of human beings and the natural world are discussed. Drawing on research into nature connectedness, restorative environments, awe, and climate-related anxiety, the author argues that a person's relationship with nature is not only an ecological but also a spiritual and moral category. The ecological dimension of spiritual education is examined in the light of universal values and the Islamic concept of human stewardship of the earth, which is deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of Uzbekistan. The article identifies the psychological mechanisms through which ecopsychology contributes to the spiritual growth of students and suggests practical directions for its integration into higher education.*

Keywords: *ecopsychology, spiritual education, student youth, nature connectedness, ecological consciousness, values, stewardship, well-being.*

INTRODUCTION

Modern students live in a paradoxical situation. They have more information about the state of the planet than any previous generation, yet many of them spend most of their day indoors, in front of screens, with little direct contact with the living world. Urbanization, digital lifestyles, and academic pressure gradually weaken the sense of belonging to nature that was natural for their grandparents. At the same time, young people are the group most worried about environmental problems, and this worry often takes the form of anxiety and helplessness rather than responsible action (Hickman et al., 2021:e866).

These circumstances raise an important question for educators: can the relationship with nature become a source of spiritual strength rather than a source of fear?

Spiritual education, known in the Uzbek pedagogical tradition as ma'naviy tarbiya, is traditionally understood as the formation of a person's inner world: values, conscience,



a sense of meaning, and responsibility toward others. In this understanding, the natural environment has usually been treated as a separate topic belonging to ecological education. A growing body of psychological research, however, suggests that the boundary between the two is largely artificial. The way a person perceives nature is closely connected with the way they perceive themselves, other people, and the sacred. Ecopsychology is the field that has made this connection its central subject.

The aim of this article is to reveal the role of ecopsychology in the spiritual education of student youth and to outline ways of applying its ideas in university practice.

Ecopsychology: Origins and Core Ideas

The term «ecopsychology» was introduced by the American historian and social critic Theodore Roszak in his book *The Voice of the Earth*. Roszak argued that modern psychology, by limiting its attention to the individual psyche and interpersonal relations, had ignored a deeper level of human identity, which he called the «ecological unconscious» (Roszak, 1992:320). In his view, the destruction of the natural environment and the growth of psychological suffering in industrial societies are two sides of one and the same alienation, and healing the one is impossible without healing the other.

A few years later, the collection *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* brought together psychologists, therapists, and environmental thinkers who developed these ideas in different directions (Roszak et al., 1995:5). Some authors focused on therapy in natural settings; others analyzed the psychological roots of consumerism; still others explored the grief and despair caused by ecological destruction. Joanna Macy, for example, proposed forms of group work in which people can openly express their pain for the world and transform it into motivation for action (Macy & Brown, 1998:26).

Ecopsychology is not a single school with a fixed set of methods. Andy Fisher describes it rather as a project that seeks to put psychology to work for the sake of life and to restore the understanding that the human psyche is embedded in a wider living whole (Fisher, 2013:7).

Close to ecopsychology stand the biophilia hypothesis and conservation psychology. Wilson suggested that humans possess an innate tendency to affiliate with other living things (Wilson, 1984: 1), and conservation psychology studies how this tendency can be translated into caring behavior (Clayton & Myers, 2015:11).



Nature Connectedness and Psychological Well-Being

While early ecopsychology was largely philosophical, the following decades brought considerable empirical evidence. The key construct here is nature connectedness, that is, the degree to which individuals include nature in their sense of self. Mayer and Frantz developed a scale to measure this feeling of kinship with the natural world and found that it predicted both life satisfaction and ecological behavior (Mayer & Frantz, 2004: 510). Nisbet and colleagues obtained similar results with their Nature Relatedness Scale (Nisbet et al., 2009:728).

A meta-analysis by Capaldi, Dopko, and Zelenski, combining data from numerous samples, confirmed a modest but consistent positive association between nature connectedness and happiness (Capaldi et al., 2014: 8). Experimental studies point in the same direction. In one of them, participants who walked for ninety minutes in a natural area showed reduced rumination and lower activity in a brain region associated with it, compared with those who walked in an urban setting (Bratman et al., 2015:8568).

Environmental psychologists have proposed explanations for such effects. According to attention restoration theory, natural environments engage a gentle, effortless kind of fascination that allows the mechanisms of directed attention, exhausted by study and work, to recover (Kaplan, 1995:174). For students, whose daily life consists largely of tasks requiring intense concentration, this finding has direct practical value. Even brief contact with nature, such as a view of trees from a window, can have measurable effects, as Ulrich demonstrated in his classic study of patients recovering from surgery (Ulrich, 1984:421).

These data matter for spiritual education, because inner calm, attention, and emotional balance form the psychological ground on which reflection about values and meaning becomes possible.

The Ecological Dimension of Spiritual Education

Spiritual maturity presupposes a sense of connection with something greater than oneself. In religious traditions this greater reality is God; in secular ethics it may be humanity, the homeland, or life as such. Nature occupies a special place here, because it is at once concrete and inexhaustible. Standing before mountains, the night sky, or the sea often evokes awe, which Keltner and Haidt describe as an emotion arising from the perception of vastness that cannot be accommodated by one's existing mental structures



(Keltner & Haidt, 2003:303). Research shows that awe diminishes the sense of self-importance and increases generosity and ethical decision-making (Piff et al., 2015: 893).

The religious and philosophical heritage of Central Asia offers a rich basis for connecting ecological and spiritual education. In the Islamic worldview, which has shaped the culture of the Uzbek people for centuries, nature is regarded as a collection of signs (ayat) pointing to the Creator, and the human being is entrusted with the role of steward (khalifa) on earth. Nasr emphasizes that the environmental crisis of modernity is, at its root, a spiritual crisis caused by the loss of a sense of the sacredness of nature (Nasr, 1996:3). Özdemir, analyzing Qur'anic ethics, notes that the concepts of trust (amana) and balance (mizan) oblige people to use natural resources with moderation and responsibility (Özdemir, 2003:19).

These ideas are not foreign to Uzbek folk culture. Proverbs, customs that forbid polluting springs and irrigation canals, the tradition of planting a tree when a child is born, and the respect paid to bread and to the land all express an understanding of nature as something to be treated with gratitude. Contemporary education can draw on this heritage and present ecological responsibility not as an external rule, but as an expression of a person's inner moral and spiritual culture.

In this sense, ecopsychology and national spiritual traditions converge: both reject a purely instrumental attitude toward the natural world.

Psychological Mechanisms of Influence

On the basis of the literature reviewed, several mechanisms can be identified through which ecopsychological approaches contribute to the spiritual education of students.

The first is the expansion of identity. Schultz shows that when people include nature in the cognitive representation of themselves, harming nature begins to feel like harming oneself (Schultz, 2002:67). For a young person, this experience widens the circle of moral concern beyond immediate personal interests, which is one of the central goals of spiritual education.

The second mechanism is emotional. Kals, Schumacher, and Montada found that emotional affinity toward nature, formed largely through positive experiences in childhood and youth, motivates protective behavior more strongly than factual knowledge alone (Kals et al., 1999:190). Spiritual education that relies only on lectures and moral instruction risks remaining abstract. Living experiences of beauty, awe, and gratitude give values an emotional root.



The third mechanism is related to meaning and resilience. Students often face uncertainty about the future, and environmental news can intensify feelings of powerlessness. Doherty and Clayton describe the direct, indirect, and psychosocial impacts of climate change on mental health, including anxiety, grief, and a sense of a lost future (Doherty & Clayton, 2011:268). Ecopsychology does not suggest ignoring these feelings. Instead, it encourages young people to acknowledge them, to share them in a supportive community, and to channel them into meaningful action. Chawla's research on people committed to environmental protection shows that a sense of competence and belonging to a group of like-minded people is decisive in turning concern into lasting care (Chawla, 2009:14). When such action is linked to the values of stewardship and service, it becomes a path of spiritual growth.

The fourth mechanism is restorative. Time spent in nature reduces stress and mental fatigue and creates space for silence, self-reflection, and contemplation.

Directions for Practice in Higher Education

How can these ideas be put into practice? First of all, it is important to integrate ecopsychological content into courses in pedagogy, psychology, ethics, and religious studies. Students should become acquainted with research on the relationship between nature and well-being and discuss it in the light of national and religious values. Such discussions work best when they are connected with students' own experiences rather than presented as abstract theory.

Second, universities can organize experiential activities: field trips to nature reserves, volunteer campaigns for tree planting and the cleaning of riverbanks, eco-camps, and projects devoted to the history of revered natural sites of Uzbekistan. Louv, describing what he calls «nature-deficit disorder,» argues that direct and unstructured contact with nature cannot be replaced by information about it (Louv, 2005:36). Reflective discussion after such activities, in which students speak about what they felt and what they came to understand about themselves, turns a simple outing into a genuine educational experience.

Third, the campus environment itself matters. Green spaces, quiet gardens, and places for rest support the psychological balance of students every day.

Finally, the role of tutors and curators should be emphasized. The spiritual influence of an educator depends largely on personal example. A tutor who treats nature with care, speaks of it with respect, and involves students in shared practical work does more



for their ecological and spiritual education than any number of formal events. This approach corresponds to the broader international agenda of education for sustainable development, which calls for learning that transforms values and behavior, not merely knowledge (UNESCO, 2020:8).

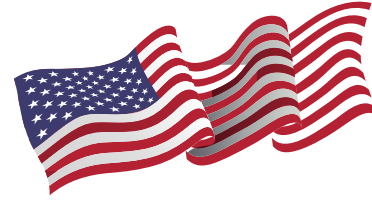
CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that ecopsychology can make a significant contribution to the spiritual education of student youth. It offers a scientifically grounded understanding of the human relationship with nature as a psychological, moral, and spiritual reality. Nature connectedness supports well-being and attention, evokes awe and gratitude, expands the boundaries of moral concern, and helps transform ecological anxiety into responsible action.

For Uzbekistan, the integration of ecopsychological ideas into education has an additional advantage: it resonates with the national and religious heritage, in which respect for land, water, and all living beings has long been considered a sign of a spiritually mature person. Future research should examine the level of nature connectedness among Uzbek students, its relationship with value orientations and religiosity, and the effectiveness of specific educational programs built on ecopsychological principles.

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