

THE SPIRITUAL ASPECT OF NATURE: A PERSPECTIVE FROM DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY

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The depth psychology of C. G. Jung provides a set of concepts for exploring the spiritual aspect of nature. According to this view, spiritual experiences occur when basic patterns or archetypes within the psyche are projected onto natural environments. Implications of this viewpoint for natural resource management and research are discussed.

Introduction

There is intense debate about the management of forests in America today. The USDA Forest Service, in response to criticism that it has focused too narrowly on economic values and commodity extraction, has begun a program called "New Perspectives." One purpose of this program is to make forest management sensitive to multiple values, in addition to the economics of timber markets. So far, the discussion of values under New Perspectives has focused mainly on biological values, such as ecosystem diversity, stability, and sustainability. There have, however, been occasional references to a third kind of value. For example, the director of the New Perspectives program states that the wealth of forests "can be measured in economic, ecological, and spiritual terms (Salwasser 1990, p. 32)," and a National Research Council report urges increased support for forestry research so that society can "secure the environmental, economic, and spiritual benefits of forests (National Research Council 1990, p. 58)."

The spiritual value of nature has frequently been celebrated in art, literature, and music (e.g. Fairchild 1989). There has, however, been little serious discussion of this topic by forest managers and scientists. The present crisis in forest management may in part be due to a failure by the forestry profession to understand and respect the strong spiritual values that many people find associated with natural environments. My purpose in this paper is to encourage natural resource researchers and managers to begin looking seriously at the spiritual aspect of nature. I will discuss how spirituality might be defined, present a psychological perspective from which spiritual phenomena can be viewed, and discuss some implications for natural resource research and management.

A Definition of "Spiritual"

Before we can talk about the spiritual aspect of nature, we need to have some notion of what we are talking about. Scientists trained in the natural sciences are often reluctant to talk about spiritual phenomena. Perhaps this is because phenomena such as spirit and soul have traditionally been conceptualized in supernatural terms, a viewpoint rejected by science. It is possible, however, to conceptualize spiritual phenomena in psychological terms that do not require a belief in supernatural entities. When spiritual phenomena are recognized as being psychological in nature, they become a legitimate topic for scientific discussion (Maslow 1974).

In this paper I will outline one approach that psychologists have taken to spiritual phenomena. First, however, I want to offer a tentative definition of what I mean when I use the word "spiritual." This word carries many nuances of meaning and refers to a complex range of phenomena. Any definition must therefore be viewed as provisional and incomplete. Most of the uses of the word that I have encountered in regard to nature, however, can be summed up in the following statement.

"Spiritual" refers to the experience of being related to or in touch with an "other" that transcends one's individual sense of self and gives meaning to one's life at a deeper than intellectual level.

In a spiritual experience, one encounters something larger or greater than one's individual self. The "other" that one encounters need not be conceptualized in traditional religious terms. Depending on the individual, the transcendent other may be seen as a supernatural deity (e.g. God), or as a natural entity (e.g. the Earth). It may be something that exists objectively "out there" (e.g. the process of evolution), or it may be a subjective, inner phenomenon (e.g. creative inspiration). It may originate independently of the human sphere (e.g. wilderness), or it may be a product of human culture (e.g. a community). For some people, the "other" may not be a specific entity at all, but the undefinable "ground of being" that gives rise to all existing things.

Regardless of how it is imaged, the experience of this "other" is more than just a passing, casual occurrence. In some important way the experience gives meaning to one's life and helps to define who one is in relation to the world. The experience of the other is felt at a level deeper than the merely intellectual. It is more than an abstract thought or concept. It may be quite difficult to express in words, but it is felt in the heart and may stir powerful emotions. Experiences of this kind can occur in many contexts and settings, both natural and human-made. For many people, however, natural environments seem to be the primary setting for spiritual experiences.

A Perspective from Depth Psychology

The viewpoint from which I will look at the spiritual aspect of nature in this paper is based on the depth psychology of C.G. Jung. Depth psychology concerns itself with the phenomena of the unconscious mind, which is that part of the human psyche that lies outside the awareness and/or control of the conscious ego. Jung's approach views the unconscious as the medium through which spiritual experiences occur. The book *Man and his Symbols*, edited by Jung (1964), provides a good general introduction to Jungian psychology.

Archetypes

According to Jung, there are different levels or layers to the psyche. Immediately below the level of conscious awareness lies the personal unconscious, which includes personal feelings, attitudes, and memories that have been repressed and remain split off from an individual's conscious ego. At a deeper level is the collective unconscious, which contains basic, instinctive patterns of behavior, emotion, and imagery that are common to all humans. These instinctive patterns, which are called "archetypes," guide and give meaning to our interactions with other people and the world. They are the "other" that people encounter in spiritual experiences.

An archetype functions like a template in the unconscious mind, giving rise to a diversity of symbolic images and expressions that enter consciousness through dreams, myths, religious images, and spontaneous fantasies (Jung 1960). One of the

most important ways in which archetypes express themselves is through projection, a psychological phenomenon in which the contents of the unconscious mind are experienced as if they belonged to someone or something outside of oneself. A classic example of projection is "love at first sight," in which undeveloped, unconscious aspects of an individual's personality are projected onto a stranger, producing a strong feeling of attraction. Projections have been observed and studied most often in the field of interpersonal relationships, but they can occur in other areas too.

From this perspective, we might suspect that spiritual experiences in nature involve the projection of unconscious archetypes onto elements of the natural environment, or onto nature as a whole (Williams 1990). A Jungian psychologist looking at spiritual experiences in nature might then ask what archetypes are being projected, and what implications this has for the individual and the collective psyche.

Mythology

Jungian psychologists often turn to mythology and literature for symbolic portrayals of the archetypes that are active in the collective psyche of a culture. One approach to identifying the spiritual significance of nature therefore might involve an examination of gods and goddesses who have been associated with various aspects of nature. In the Greek tradition this would include Demeter, the goddess of vegetation, fertility, and agriculture; Pan, the rustic deity of woods and fields; and many others. Mythological characters can still capture the imaginations of modern people and are sometimes used to personify the beliefs and values of environmentalists. For example, the moon goddess Artemis, who is associated with forests and hunting, has been nominated as the "Goddess of Conservation" (Hughes 1990), and deep ecologists have adopted the earth goddess, Gaia, as the personification of the whole-earth organism (Lovelock 1979, Devall and Sessions 1985).

To learn about the archetypes underlying the experience of nature, one can also examine the way in which elements of natural environments have been used in the mythological and religious traditions of various cultures. For example, many mythological traditions tell of a symbolic "World Tree" that stands at the center of the universe. The World Tree is the symbolic axis or point of contact that connects mundane earthly existence with the divine (i.e. archetypal) realms above and below the earth (Eliade 1959).

Sacred groves are another common feature in ancient religious traditions (Vest 1983, Hughes 1990). These groves of trees were set aside and dedicated, usually to a goddess. For the Celts such groves provided a link between the mundane and the sacred worlds (Vest 1983), and in this sense their symbolic function was much like that of the World Tree. Sacred groves were considered inviolable, and were protected by civil and religious laws. The modern concern for preserving and protecting wilderness appears to echo this ancient regard for sacred groves. Wilderness managers have been likened to the "Keepers of the Sacred Grove" (Brown and Freed 1990).

Individuation

Jung noted that archetypal symbols and themes arose not only in mythology but also in the dreams and fantasies of individual people. He described several archetypes that characteristically emerged in the course of psychological analysis with his patients. These archetypes are crucial to the process of personal growth and change, a process that Jung called "individuation" (von Franz 1964). A Jungian approach to the spirituality of

nature might therefore ask how the archetypes and the process of individuation are expressed in the human-nature relationship.

The most obvious example is the archetype of the Great Mother, a powerful psychological complex that can have either a positive, nurturing effect or a negative, destructive effect on the psychological development of the individual. "Mother Nature" in her benevolent and destructive moods is a personification of this archetype, projected onto nature (Cooper 1978).

Another example is the Anima, which is what Jung called the unconscious feminine side of a man's personality. The Anima is associated with creative, intuitive, and spiritual aspects of life that tend to remain unconscious in many men. The allure and fascination of wild settings may involve a projection of this archetype onto nature. The feminine nymphs and nature spirits that inhabit trees and streams in many mythological and folk traditions can be interpreted as personifications of the Anima.

In Jung's psychology, the guiding force and the ultimate goal of the individuation process is an archetype called "the Self." The Self represents movement toward wholeness and the balancing of the different sides of the psyche into a unique, integrated personality. This archetype, projected onto forests and wilderness, could give rise to the perception of nature as the embodiment of perfect balance, beauty, symmetry, and wholeness.

The Role of Projections in Experiencing Nature

Unconscious archetypes have powerful effects on how people experience and behave in the world (Jung 1960). For this reason it is important for the conscious mind to have methods for relating to the archetypes in a constructive way. This has traditionally been the function of mythological symbols and religious rituals, but these symbols and rituals have lost much of their force in our modern culture. For many people, nature now seems to call forth the archetypal experiences that traditional religious images no longer evoke.

When archetypes are projected onto natural environments, these environments evoke powerful emotions and take on a profound significance for the individual. For the nature-lover, trees and other natural entities can evoke awe-inspiring fascination and reverence. The forest or wilderness may seem like an paradise on earth, a magical place of eternal mystery and perfection, far removed from the mundane world of everyday life. Vest (1983) identifies the experience of solitude in nature with the "soul mood" sought by the ancient Celts in their sacred groves. Even modern, scientifically trained people are apt to experience this mood, as the following description of a giant sequoia grove from an otherwise very technical forestry textbook of the 1950's indicates:

In their presence, all sense of proportion is lost, and smaller trees which may be 4 to 10 ft. in diameter appear dwarfed by comparison. It is small wonder, therefore, that a feeling of reverence comes over one upon entering a grove ... whose gigantic red trunks are like the supports of some vast outdoor cathedral. The emotions aroused by the silent ageless majesty of these great trees are akin to those of primitive man for whom they would have been objects of worship, and it is unlikely that many centuries of scientific training will ever completely efface this elemental feeling (Harlowe and Harrar 1958, p. 202).

Experiences of this kind are important to psychological health because they draw people toward connection and relationship

with the transcendent archetypes that underlie their individual personalities. This is the psychological meaning of the ancient myths in which the World Tree and the Sacred Grove were points of contact between the mundane and the sacred realms.

Withdrawing Projections

There are potential problems, however, as long as archetypal projections remain unconscious -- that is, as long as an individual does not realize that the experience comes from within the psyche, and instead believes that it is entirely due to something "out there." A person who is projecting an archetype tends to perceive the world in terms of ideals and absolutes, and this can blind the person to the objective nature of the "other" onto which the archetype is being projected. This can cause people to disregard objective information, to hold unrealistic expectations, and to behave in fanatical ways.

From the viewpoint of Jungian psychology, healthy relationships with people and things require one to become more conscious of the archetypal projections in one's perceptions and behavior (Jaffe 1990). One must learn to see the difference between the inner archetype and the outer object or person onto which it is being projected. Withdrawing projections in this way is not easy to do. It can be a painful process, involving feelings of loss and disillusionment. Ultimately, however, it leads to a more balanced and realistic appreciation of both the objective and the subjective aspects of the world.

A person who becomes aware of how archetypes are projected onto nature acquires a sort of "double vision." The experience of nature becomes like looking out of a house through a glass window pane. Through the window one can see objects that lie outside the house, but the glass also shows reflections of things that are inside. Similarly, through our experience of nature we can observe the workings of the outer world of physics and biology, but at the same time nature reflects back to us the images of our own inner, psychological world. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the night sky, where the stars and constellations carry the names and images of our mythological heritage while at the same time serving as an entry into a scientific understanding of the physical universe (Grossinger 1988, de Santillana and von Dechend 1969).

Inner-outer Parallels

Jungian psychologists have pointed out that there is a correspondence between the outer wilderness of nature and the inner "wilderness" of the unconscious mind (Meier 1985). The archetypes represent instinctive, intuitive psychological processes that are not under our conscious control. They can be viewed as the inner, subjective counterpart of the processes of outer nature (Jung 1933, ch. 5). In this view, the heavy-handed manipulation of natural environments by Western society parallels the conscious ego's repressive attitude toward the unconscious, non-rational, and intuitive parts of our own psyches. When we manipulate the outer environment without understanding and respecting its physical and ecological functions, these functions return to us in the negative form of pollution and global climate change. Similarly, when instinctive psychological functions are ignored or manipulated by our rational egos, these functions come back to us in the form of neurotic symptoms. The repression of natural functions in the psyche and their return in a negative form are depicted using nature symbolism in the following two examples from Greek mythology.

Pan, the pagan god of woods and fields, was a wild, irrational deity with the horns and hooves of a goat. He was believed to evoke sudden fear in solitary travelers in the wilds -- hence the word "panic." Despite his frightening qualities, he was viewed in a basically positive way by the ancient Greeks. He loved to play the pan-pipes, and the nymphs who inhabited trees, streams, and caves were his partners in dance. He eventually came to be regarded as the representative of paganism and the personification of all nature. The name "Pan" literally means "All" (Bulfinch 1959).

At the time of Christ's birth, a mysterious voice was supposed to have been heard in the Greek Isles announcing that great Pan was dead (Bulfinch 1959, de Santillana and von Dechend 1969). The death of Pan could be interpreted psychologically as the repression of the instinctive, wild parts of the psyche, which occurred with the rise of monotheistic consciousness in Western society. Great Pan did not really die, however. His horned and hooved image was incorporated into the Christian mythology of Satan. Thus when the natural archetype of Pan was repressed, it reappeared in a negative form as the great Enemy, a source of danger, suffering, and evil (Nichols 1980).

In Jungian terms, we could say that the archetype of the nature deity Pan was cast into the darkness of the collective "Shadow," which is the archetype containing all the impulses and attitudes judged unacceptable by society. The inner psychic struggle between consciousness and instinct was then projected onto the outer world of nature. Ever since, Western civilization has been acting out an archetypal battle between Light and Darkness with wild nature in the role of Darkness, which must be conquered, civilized, and subdued.

Another account of conflict is found in the myth of the wood-cutter Erisichthon, who angered the goddess Demeter by cutting a grove of sacred trees. Heedless of Demeter's pleas, Erisichthon cut an ancient oak at the very center of the sacred grove, thereby killing the Dryad (wood-nymph) who inhabited the tree. In retribution Demeter called upon the goddess of famine to afflict Erisichthon with insatiable hunger. Driven by the craving for food, he spent all his wealth and repeatedly sold his own daughter as a slave in order to feed his hunger. But the great quantities of food that he ate gave him no satisfaction. Ultimately, he died when he tried to devour his own body (Graves 1960, Bulfinch 1959, Hamilton 1942). This myth can be interpreted as a symbolic depiction of our culture's devaluation and repression of the intuitive, spiritual aspect of nature and of the psyche, and the consequences this has produced.

Erisichthon's fault was not that he made a living by cutting trees. There would have been no problem if he had been content to cut only trees that stood outside the sacred grove. Erisichthon suffered because he refused to limit his cutting and because he would not respect the spiritual dimension represented by the Dryad in the oak tree. When Demeter herself, the goddess of vegetation, fertility, and harvest, appeared to plead with him in the sacred grove, he still stubbornly refused to deviate from his course. As a result, the archetype of the benign goddess returned to him in the negative form of hunger and famine. Like the reemergence of Pan in the image of Satan, this represents the psychological fact that a repressed archetype does not disappear, but assumes a negative form that can overwhelm the conscious ego. This interpretation of the myth suggests that our culture's devaluation of the spiritual dimension that the psyche experiences in nature has led to an insatiable hunger for goods and resources that is undercutting the physical basis of our survival.

The story of Erisichthon seems to foreshadow the multiplicity of compulsive and addictive behaviors that now plague our society. Jungians have suggested that modern people are experiencing a spiritual famine, and that addictive behavior is a futile attempt to fill the spiritual emptiness with an inadequate physical substitute (Jaffe 1990, Johnson 1987). In our culture, which has emphasized objective knowledge of the outer, physical world while neglecting the inner, spiritual side of life, one of the greatest values of nature may be the opportunity it offers us to become reconnected with our own unconscious nature and to fill the spiritual vacuum within (Williams 1990).

Conversely, it can be argued that the crises we have created in the outer world of nature can only be resolved by healing the divisions and conflicts within our own psyches. Reconciliation with both outer and inner nature seems essential if our civilization is to survive.

Implications for Research

The ideas described above are an outgrowth of the work of Carl Jung. As environmental issues become more prominent, the relationship between nature and the unconscious psyche is increasingly being discussed among Jungian psychologists. The book *A Testament to the Wilderness*, edited by Hinshaw (1985), is an excellent example. If we take these ideas seriously, there is clearly an urgent need to recognize and to learn more about the spiritual aspects of nature and psyche.

In approaching the spiritual aspect of nature, it is important to recognize that the human psyche can function and communicate in two quite different modes. Our technological culture places great emphasis on the rational and analytical mode of thought, which seeks to understand and explain everything in terms that are as explicit, precise, and unambiguous as possible. In this mode, mathematics and logic are the tools of choice for understanding how things work and for ordering our affairs.

Spiritual phenomena, on the other hand, emanate from the intuitive side of the psyche, which manifests itself in an ambiguous language of nonverbal imagery and symbolism. This mode of psychological functioning lends itself more naturally to the indirect, many-layered expressions of art, poetry, and music than to the rigorous, literal language of science. It may be difficult for scientifically trained researchers and managers to deal with the spiritual aspect of nature because their training teaches them to devalue and reject the intuitive and emotional mode of functioning in which spiritual phenomena appear (Vining and Schroeder 1987).

To do justice to spiritual phenomena in natural resource research and management, it will be necessary to develop a more balanced relationship between the rational and the intuitive sides of the psyche, with neither function dominating the other. Towards this goal, I think it may be helpful to reconsider and broaden some of the underlying assumptions and attitudes of our scientific approach. Following are a few of my tentative thoughts about how to do this, inspired by ideas from phenomenological, experiential, Jungian, and archetypal psychology.

Spiritual phenomena might best be approached by adopting a phenomenological as opposed to a physical definition of reality. That is, the starting point for investigation would be the "life-world" as it is immediately experienced by people (Keen 1975). Psychological phenomena would be regarded as real in their own right and would be studied on their own terms, rather than being reduced to mechanistic concepts taken from the physical or biological sciences (Giorgi 1970).

Spiritual phenomena in nature are revealed in qualitative accounts of individuals' subjective experiences, rather than in quantitative measurements and statistical models of behavior. Material for study could be drawn from many sources, including surveys and interviews, written materials published by various groups and organizations, art, literature, and mythology. An important source of material would be the researcher's own personal experiences, intuitions, dreams, and feelings regarding nature. The researcher would not be a detached, passive observer, but would be actively involved in discovering the spiritual significance of nature in the context of his or her own life.

In the course of this exploration, the researcher would be engaged in an interplay between the rational and the intuitive functions of the psyche. At times it might be necessary to suspend the rational and analytical mode of thinking, to allow the intuitive process to function without interference. At other times the researcher would need to step back from the flow of intuition to clarify, organize, and evaluate the view that is emerging. The process would not proceed in a straight line. The intuitive process cannot be hurried, forced, or manipulated according to conscious plans. The researcher would need patience and a willingness to follow the process through many unexpected turns.

Methods for approaching this study could be drawn from several areas of psychology. Jungian psychologists have evolved methods for bringing people into contact with the unconscious mind in psychotherapy and for interpreting the symbolic expressions that this process produces (Johnson 1986, Hillman 1975). Elements of the Jungian approach could be valuable for increasing our awareness and openness to the spiritual aspect of nature. Techniques developed by experiential psychologists could also be used to unfold the unconscious meanings hidden in the vague felt senses we experience in natural environments (Gendlin 1981, Schroeder 1990). Methods developed by phenomenological psychologists (e.g. Giorgi 1985) could be helpful for analyzing the meaning structures contained in descriptive accounts of people's experiences in nature.

The findings of research on the spiritual aspect of nature may not lend themselves well to the traditional, "dry" research report. Methods for conveying the researcher's findings may require more personal, evocative, and metaphorical expressions (Maslow 1974, Porteous 1984). Artistic, musical, and poetic works could be an important means for communicating new understandings about the human-nature relationship (Crowfoot 1990).

This approach to the spirituality of nature will not produce any definitive, predictive models, nor will it yield any final, "true" answers regarding the management of natural resources. Its purpose is not to give humans any greater degree of control over outer or inner nature. Its underlying motive is to deepen our awareness of the intuitive relationship between humans and nature, and to allow ourselves to be changed by that awareness. In this way, by balancing and reconciling the rational scientific and the intuitive spiritual processes of the psyche in ourselves and in our society, we may be able to move toward a more viable relationship between humans and the natural world.

Implications for Management

Natural resource managers often seem to believe that opposition to resource management policies is due mainly to ignorance on the part of the public. Many managers view the public as victims of misinformation, and assume that if correct information about resource management could be effectively

communicated, then public protest would greatly diminish. The viewpoint outlined in this paper suggests, however, that the problem goes deeper than a simple question of factual knowledge. Beneath the surface of natural resource conflicts (such as the spotted owl and old growth controversies), there may be powerful unconscious archetypes, which do not respond to logical argument or rational persuasion.

People who have experienced a spiritual connection in nature may find *any* effort toward management and control of natural environments to be disturbing, no matter how scientifically well-founded such efforts are. From a spiritual viewpoint, nature represents an "other" to be loved and respected, rather than a physical and biological process to be controlled and manipulated for human benefit. The projection of unconscious archetypes onto a natural setting results in a deep emotional bond that can make any human intervention in the setting appear morally wrong, especially if it is carried out in a coldly rational way.

Managers who are trained in the physical and biological sciences may be inclined to ignore or discount the spiritual values of people who oppose their management efforts, because such values seem inconsistent with a scientific understanding of the resources. There is a tendency to regard spiritual value as a recreational "amenity" -- a somewhat frivolous side issue next to the "real" concerns of hard science and economics. Arguing that spiritual values do not have a basis in traditional science does not, however, in any way diminish their power to motivate people. To many people, ancient forests and wilderness are genuinely sacred places, even though they are not associated with any officially recognized religion. A threat to the existence of wild nature is a threat to the central spiritual value of many people's lives. Recognizing this, it should not be surprising that people's reactions to such threats can be vehement and violent.

To move toward a better understanding of these conflicts, natural resource professionals need to become more aware and respectful of the psychological and spiritual aspects of natural environments. We need to recognize that humans and nature are not separate, and that spiritual phenomena are therefore an inherent aspect of the natural world. Spiritual phenomena are just as much a part of the real world as are ecological processes like competition and predation. By now most people realize that management efforts that ignore ecological interrelations among species can produce unexpected and disastrous consequences. We need to recognize that ignoring the psychological and spiritual connections between humans and the natural world can result in equally nasty surprises.

At the same time, people who feel a spiritual connection with nature need to recognize that nature also has physical, biological, and economic dimensions that cannot be ignored. I believe it is essential for our civilization to regain a genuine sense of the sacred in nature, but in so doing we must not lose sight of the scientific understandings we have gained. People who experience spirituality in nature should strive for clearer awareness and communication of their own spiritual feelings, but they should resist the temptation to disparage those who hold a different view of nature. No single viewpoint can encompass all the dimensions of nature, but if we respect, listen to, and learn from each other, perhaps we can find a new management perspective that integrates both the science and the spirituality of natural environments.

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