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NATURE THERAPY
FOR
EVERYONE



LIFE CAN BE BEAUTIFUL:
AN INTRODUCTION
TO ECOTHERAPY

NATURE THERAPY FOR EVERYONE

An introduction to ecotherapy

Stephen McCabe

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Introduction

About the author

One eighties summer, back when I was seven or eight years of age, I was allowed to set my alarm clock for the early morning hours. I went to a nearby park with a notebook and pen to see what animals I could find. I saw a hedgehog for the first time, and it felt like meeting a visitor from another dimension. I just couldn't believe that there was this unique spiky creature in front of me, living independently, getting on with its weird little life in shrubs and muck. I still get a feeling of awe when I recall that moment, watching it curl up in the early morning dew.

I grew up as a proper city boy in the suburbs of Liverpool, England. Somehow, when I became a teenager, I became so caught up with 'finding out who I was' that I neglected what was happening on the earth around me for decades! So much of my life was lost in fantasy and the quest for identity. The importance of nature was forgotten.

I spent the majority of my 20's and 30's as a musician, also training and working as a person-centred counsellor. However, something about traditional, indoor counselling never really gelled with me. When I discovered ecotherapy, for the first time in my life, the concept of therapy felt exciting.

About thirty years after meeting the hedgehog, I had one of the most powerful experiences of my life. Whilst walking my dog in a typical city park, everything in nature suddenly felt so alive. Words fail to capture what I experienced that day, simply watching trees reaching towards the sky and noticing curious blackbirds foraging for worms. The joy was indescribable.

Most people first explore mindfulness in indoor settings. However, for reasons that I don't remember, I decided to try out my first ever mindful breathing exercise outdoors. It changed my life. It wasn't until the following year that I realised I had been practising nature therapy that

day—although the term “nature therapy” was unfamiliar to me at that point. Nature therapy is now an essential part of my life, and I want to share it with as many people as possible.

About nature therapy

The term ‘nature therapy’ is used interchangeably with the term ‘ecotherapy’. They are referring to the same principle. To save confusion, for the rest of this book, I will use the term ‘ecotherapy’. To summarise, ecotherapy refers to therapies and activities which deliberately aim to improve mental health and wellbeing through connection with nature.

Ecotherapy is a broad, umbrella term. How it is approached depends on the therapist. Ecotherapy may be primarily focused on horticulture and gardening, for example by getting a group of people who struggle with their mental health together to cultivate growth. Some ecotherapists may be qualified psychotherapists who offer ‘walk and talk’ outdoor counselling sessions, whereas others may focus on helping people to create art or poetry inspired by nature. Some ecotherapists work with aspects of all of these approaches. There are many more approaches still!

This book introduces my preferred approach to ecotherapy, which in a nutshell embraces both mindfulness and creativity. It is important to stress that my approach to ecotherapy is not *the* approach to ecotherapy. Besides, in a few years, my own practise may have grown in to new directions altogether!

‘Ecotherapy’ and ‘nature therapy’ may seem like new terms in the field of therapy, but it is probably the oldest kind of mental health support that there is. As it is currently in a primary stage and slowly becoming more recognised, the language is still developing. These terms may date quickly. If that is the case, it doesn’t matter; hopefully, the content of this little book will remain relevant regardless. As long as communion with nature becomes central to our wellbeing once again, the label given to the practise is irrelevant.

Finally, although this book is not about Buddhism, without Buddhism it

wouldn't have happened. It is important to acknowledge that.

I do hope that you enjoy this book and that it helps to deepen your connection to this beautiful planet. If you have any feedback at all, please drop me an email and let me know your thoughts at stephen@naturetherapyonline.net. I would love to hear from you.

Enjoy, and thanks for reading!

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1. Mindfulness in Nature

Majestic creatures fly across our skies, sometimes singing with joy.

Wood grows from tiny seeds, reaching towards a star. It is driven by some force that we can't comprehend.

An egg cracks and a fluffy yellow chick appears. Its beady black eyes reflect the sunlight.

The difference between living a beautiful life and being lost in a sea of fantasies is in paying close attention to nature. Mind-blowing phenomena are all around.

Cast your mind as far back as your memory can reach, to a moment you experienced in nature. Perhaps you were playing in a local park, watching a small mammal scurrying about in the woodlands, or claiming a sheltered shrub as a special den or hideout. Our childlike minds were not misguided to find such magic in nature, our adult minds are simply so full of crap that we can't see what's right in front of us.

We experience constant hallucinations that we label 'daydreaming'. Endless thoughts keep our focus on the internal to such a degree that we forget our feet are moving when we are walking. We are stuck in non-stop planning about what's coming next, or fretting about yesterday's perceived mistakes. Meanwhile, we walk past magnificent plants and creatures (even in the most urban of locations), oblivious to sounds and sights of an almost psychedelic diversity.

What are we? To contemplate nature at least once per day and to ask *what are we?* — with no desire for an answer — is at the heart of my approach to ecotherapy.

There is a pure consciousness living beneath our endless thoughts, and it is deeply connected to nature. When we experience it, we recognise that our own lives are as miraculous as the most stunning peacock, perfectly

formed crystal, or ancient tree.

To stop taking life for granted; this is what ecotherapy is about. Few words are adequate to describe the power of nature, but I know that you understand this already, because we have all experienced it. We can't fully understand how ecotherapy makes us feel through discussion alone. Ecotherapy is a potentially life-changing praxis—and yet it is remarkably simple. *Pay attention to nature.*

I do not practise ecotherapy every day to 'escape from real life', as some would have it. Nature is real life. My noisy mind — prone to anger and scathing judgements — is often presenting me with unreal perceptions of the world. These perceptions take me away from the reality of nature. Ecotherapy balances this out for me. I hope it does the same for you too.

Later in this book, I will introduce 50 simple exercises that can help you to tune into nature. The first thing you need to do is to make a conscious effort to spend time outdoors every day (or for as many days of the week as is possible) in all seasons.

Making time for nature can be worked into your routine. For example, if you walk your dog every day, the time is already booked. If you're making short driving trips to and from work, maybe you can walk instead. Even creating just a little time each day to really focus on nature is so beneficial.

There are even simple tasks that we can do indoors with open windows that can make our day that bit more beautiful. Ecotherapy is not off-limits if getting outdoors is problematic due to mental health, life circumstances, or any other reason. Moreover, you may have disabilities or sensory impairments which mean that some of the tasks I suggest are simply impossible to do. Please find the ones that work for you, and simply leave the others. Ecotherapy is for everyone.

Putting your phone on silent when you're engaged with ecotherapy, and refusing to be drawn back towards that time-wasting little swine is a very important part of this practise. You only need to check one text and your

mind can be taken away from nature for the rest of your time outdoors. Notice the extent to which these devices have control over our minds, emotions and behaviour. Yes, they are very useful indeed, but everything has a time and a place!

Ecotherapy can be a deeply spiritual experience, although I do understand that this kind of language can potentially feel alienating. Spirituality as a concept has been appropriated and abused for millennia (as well as being celebrated in many beautiful ways). I'd never considered myself a spiritual person until I fell back in love with nature as an adult.

In this context, spirituality is not about some other plane of existence; some place that we might find after we die (although it might be there too). The spiritual land is right here, right now, all around us. We are in heaven or hell (or boring old purgatory) depending on what we perceive.

Listen, and it's there. It's in the soothing coos of city pigeons, or the scurry of a cheeky squirrel in the bushes. That's it!

Breathe in deeply, and it's there. It's the atmosphere going in and out of your chest, connecting with your lungs; the freshness of each breath, keeping you alive for no fathomable reason.

Pick up a natural object such as a stick or a stone, and it's there. Where did it come from? Is there anything on this earth that's genuinely made by humans alone? *What are we?*

A determined sperm meets an egg, and an elephant foetus begins to grow.

A mustard seed sits in a jar for years; with water and light and it begins to move.

Storytelling monkeys travel around in machines on the most beautiful planet in the solar system.

This is ecotherapy.

Exercise: grounding yourself in nature

This is an exercise to do daily, or ad hoc whenever you need it.

Firstly, find a (preferably outdoor) place where you are comfortable sitting, standing, lying or leaning; a place where you won't feel self-conscious closing your eyes for a few minutes, and where you feel safe to do that. Being by an open window is fine if you are unable to leave home. Once you are comfortable, continue.

Start by closing your eyes, or lowering your eyes to the ground if that feels more comfortable. Take a few big deep breaths for around 30 seconds. Bring your focus back to your breath whenever your mind wanders (which it will)!

Now pay attention to the solid earth beneath you. Put all of your focus into the feeling of your body connecting to, or being held by, the earth. Keep your focus here for around 30 seconds, and if your mind wanders, gently bring it back to this very physical feeling.

Now pay attention solely to what you can hear—to nature sounds, human sounds, machine sounds, animal sounds. Listen to everything in your entire soundscape, going from the most obvious sounds to listening out for less obvious sounds. Pay attention to sound for 30-60 seconds. What's going on out there?

Now focus on the air and the wind (if it's windy). Does your skin feel warm, cold, moderate? Can you feel the air on any part of your body? How does your skin feel, connecting with the atmosphere and space around you? Tune into this sensation for around 30 seconds.

What does it smell like where you are? Just notice this.

If you can touch anything in your vicinity, how does it feel?

Finally, open your eyes or lift your head, and look all around you. What

can you see? What are the colours like? What's going on around you?
Look around for 30 seconds or so.

Thank yourself for tuning into your experience. Remember that you can do this any time you like, with or without a script to hand. You don't need to remember it all or do it in any particular order, this is simply the art of paying attention to your senses and nature. It's free, and it can be wonderful.

If you would like a guided recording of this meditation/grounding exercise, you can download it for free from naturetherapyonline.net

(With gratitude to Caroline Brazier from the Tariki Trust for passing this exercise on to me.)

2. Conditioning and Awareness

Two lovers go for a walk along a city beach. As they begin, the sound of the waves triggers chit chat about a wildlife documentary they had watched together the previous week. They both comment on how much they love dolphins, despite never seeing dolphins here in their home country.

They fall into a comfortable silence as they walk. One partner fixates her eyes on the shoreline, tuning into the sound of the water. She occasionally thinks back to happy 'staycation' holidays as a child. Mental images of a bucket and spade briefly pop into her mind, but she is barely conscious of this. She feels dreamy and content.

Her male partner is looking out towards the city, in the other direction. He tunes into the nearby sound of arcade machines and the sickly smell of candy floss coming from a small food van. The sea itself holds vague memories of a day in his childhood when his parents refused to take him to the beach. He is unaware of the memory; his mind is a party of endless thoughts and images. He simply looks towards the city without question, but he feels relaxed enough and is enjoying the walk.

Whilst he watches the city views, and his partner watches puppies running in and out of the waves, they both miss the sight of two dolphins dancing in and out of the water. It's such a rare occurrence that it makes the local newspaper the next day.

They both go home having had a fairly pleasant experience, following their usual patterns of attention.

Ecotherapy asks us to look not only outside of ourselves but also at our reactions to nature. Most of us are aware of basic human conditioning. For example, the person who has a positive experience with a friendly swan as a child (a rare thing, lucky child) grows up to like swans, whereas another child who was chased by a fierce swan grows up to be wary of them (okay, hands up, it's me with swan-phobia). When being mindful

within nature, it can become apparent that such conditioning affects our lives in subtle ways. It may also highlight how much of life we are missing because of it.

Even when we pay deliberate attention, it's easy to search unawares for things in nature that we find pleasant. It only takes one vaguely positive experience glimpsing a cute robin on a local walk for us to forever look in that direction when we revisit the same place.

When you're looking at the same kind of tree each time you're on your walks, what other things are you depriving yourself from experiencing? Perhaps you're avoiding certain places without even knowing why. The reasons are sometimes complete nonsense; subconscious memories from seemingly insignificant past events.

I recently ran an ecotherapy group in a city park in Edinburgh. In attendance was a woman who loves Hawthorn trees. She was aware that she gravitates towards them. When she was invited to explore an aspect of nature that she wouldn't usually notice, she took a walk to a small stream that she had barely noticed previously, despite living in this area for years. She found it especially interesting as the stream was the most obvious natural attraction in the park. She was blown away by the peacefulness that she experienced watching the water run by. This led to a group discussion about the possibility of the stream becoming her next 'draw' in nature, possibly replacing the Hawthorn as 'her thing' in the park.

There will always be places that we particularly like in nature, and so there should be! By all means, find your special outdoor places, visit them regularly and cherish them. However, try to become aware of this, rather than simply gravitating towards the same places unawares. There is so much incredible life out there; so much colour, texture, sound, scent and movement, that we sometimes need to actively say to our favourite spots, 'okay babes, I know you're a lovely stream, but what else is interesting out here today?'

Nature — all of life — is constantly changing. As humans, we have an

instinctive fear of change, probably stemming from our fear of the big unknown (death), and so we seek out experiences that feel familiar. It can be very comforting. Simultaneously, exploring new experiences is where we find a lot of genuine joy in life. We are such contradictory and complicated animals!

Another way that we can fall into 'comfort-seeking' in nature is with the simple act of species identification. Naming things is a pretty good idea for us as people; it's the basis of our language and how most of us function in society. However, it's important to realise that although identifying things can certainly be an ecotherapy activity (one of many), ecotherapy in and of itself is not about 'identifying' nature or wildlife. We have an unfortunate habit as people to (sometimes, at least) stop looking closely at individual life forms once we have identified them with a label.

For example, when seeing a species of bird for the first time, we might return home and find it enjoyable and even fascinating to identify it on the internet or in a wildlife book. I certainly enjoy this anyway. I am an old hand as a therapist, but I am still learning new things about nature every day (sometimes very simple things too). If approached with joyful curiosity, it can deepen our connection to nature. However, we need to be careful about this too. Once we apply a name to something, it can be tempting to then walk past a creature or plant of that same species thinking, 'I've seen one of those before'. This is often done so unconsciously that we can be quite unaware of it. Be mindful and watch how you apply your newfound information!

Remember that point I made earlier about not checking your phone when you're having outdoor ecotherapy time? It can be so easy to 'quickly' look up the name of a tree when we are having our special outdoor time, and then spend the rest of the walk on the phone, jumping from one thing to another. Looking at that screen, regardless of the reason (unless of course it's important) can be counter-productive.

There is another side to this argument though. For example, there are several apps which you can use to help you to identify nature via taking photos of it, and other apps designed to help you keep notes of your

nature discoveries. I have been known to use them occasionally myself, but I do notice a personal tendency to get stuck inside the app for longer than I'd like to, rather than looking outwards. However, it's important to note that we're all different in that respect, and if you struggle to make a nature connection and apps sounds appealing, then it may be the case that nature apps help you to connect. Please just do your best to be as self-aware as possible; regularly check in with yourself and question whether it is helping or hindering your nature connection.

Alongside identifying species, try taking a walk *without* naming things. Let words and labels come and go. Walk with the freshest eyes possible. Watch your reactions to what you notice. Be curious about species that you think you understand. Next time you see 'another squirrel' (or whatever animal is common in your area), consider following it to watch what it is up to today. You might see it in a new light.

Ecotherapy gives us a deeper insight into life itself — including our own minds and habits. And the more self-aware we are, the more we can vividly experience the explosion of magic and vibrancy that is life on planet Earth.

3. Storytime

Somewhere on planet Earth, there is a land of lush green hills and fierce storms. In the winter months, it is ruled by a giant, blue-skinned, one-eyed goddess who breathes cold air into the atmosphere.

Malevolent blue men float in the northern seas; their heads peep and bob on the surface of the waves. They drag anyone who tries to cross the sea into the water, never to be seen again.

As the seasons change, the winter queen is toppled by a beautiful summer goddess. She brings flowers, warmth and joy to the inhabitants, who celebrate wildly when she appears.

To punish the celebrants, the winter goddess sends a chariot-driving hag, hidden by grey clouds, into the skies. The 'Thunderhag' breathes fire onto the land below, in the form of lightning strikes. A muscular, ginger-haired hero throws spears into the sky to defend the land from the hag's lightning. His spears pierce the hag-clouds, and so lightning is always accompanied by heavy rain.

When the hag is driven away, summer is joyous once again. A fairy queen, dressed in green moss, lives underneath a secret hill. With a strong hand, she rules the fairies of the underworld.

Within the homes of humans, small human-like creatures called 'brownies' appear at nighttime. Unseen to the human eye, they generously help humans with their housework. People leave out milk and sweets with gratitude to the generous little people.

Seals take off their outer skins on shorelines, to reveal human-like beings underneath. They form complicated love affairs with humans.

This majestic and dangerous land is known to us as Scotland.

Human beings have a deep and important need to tell and to hear stories.

Film and TV would not be the cultural success that they are otherwise. Something, however, is missing when we engage in the passive act of watching TV; our imaginations have no opportunity to fill in missing gaps with personal images and narratives. This is one of the reasons why the ancient mythologies of the world are so powerful to this day.

Scottish mythology is by no stretch alone in weaving story with nature. Most of the characters and stories mentioned above — some of which were passed down for thousands of years through oral storytelling — deal with the environment (Scottish mythology seems to have an obsession with the weather in particular, which will come of no surprise to anyone who has been to Scotland!)

Mythical stories vary dramatically across the globe, but many began as ways of explaining not just universal human archetypes and behaviour, but also the magic and wonder of nature.

You might argue, ‘but now that we have scientific explanations for natural phenomena, such as how electricity plays a part in lightning, do we still need stories about flying hags?’ These stories are not only cultural gems to be treasured as a part of world history, but they draw our attention to the wonder and beauty of the world around us. The metaphors are often fascinatingly accurate in their own creative ways. The Thunderhag, for example, gives human shape to phenomena that many of us find instinctively terrifying. Hag or no hag, it is mesmerising what goes on up there when lightning strikes!

Ancient tales and myths dealing with nature point towards nature itself. Part of the excitement we feel in hearing myths and folk tales is in recognising the very real and powerful sensations we feel when lightning strikes, rain falls heavily, or the sun rises before our eyes; things we take for granted in our everyday lives.

At a recent ecotherapy retreat, I worked on a story/myth exercise with a close friend of mine. She told me about how as a child, she was drawn to tiny things such as dolls houses and miniature figurines. She felt embarrassed about it as she got older. While we were having this

conversation, we both looked down upon a garden patch where small plants and tiny young trees grew. My friend reflected on the tiny creatures living amongst the plants, right here in front of us, so small that we could barely see them. Her childhood joy collecting miniature figurines pointed towards something real. The life going on beneath our feet is as awe-inspiring as any fairy tale.

Taking life for granted seems to be a part of our evolution. Anything we find familiar becomes normalised, and then it fades into the background. It makes sense—if we were enchanted by every sight of life around us, we wouldn't get very far either as a species or as functioning human beings! I'm not suggesting that we do that, but I am suggesting that we make *some* time for it.

Stories can help us to connect with nature. Let your surroundings conjure up tales and beings. You don't need to write them down. We need to relearn how to embrace our imaginations for the sake of the creative process itself.

We live with deep capitalist conditioning. It fools us into thinking that everything we do should become a product that earns us money or (at the very least) attention. This is modern culture; it is not how things have been for the vast majority of human history.

By all means, share your creations and stories with the world if you are proud of them. Appreciation is important, and in this society, we need money to survive, to pay rent, bills and afford the commodities that help us survive, whether that be decent food, music we love or quirky ornaments; whatever is your thing. These are not black-and-white statements I'm making here. But please also know that creating a polished final product from our nature experiences doesn't have to be the reason that we create a story — or for that matter a poem, a song or any piece of art.

Imagination itself can help us to see nature, play with it, and connect to it. If you don't especially enjoy creating things yourself, or you aren't ready for that, then pick up a book of old myths, fairy tales or local folk

tales. They are not just for children. You might be surprised by how deep and powerful they are for adults—and how cleverly they often explain our relationship with nature.

I've often heard people jokingly wishing that mythical beings such as unicorns or elves existed, to make life more interesting. Let's face it; if unicorns and elves physically existed alongside us, we would take them for granted, in the very way that we take birds for granted. I can easily imagine the following sentence being uttered in an alternate human universe: *'If only sweet little sparrows like the ones from fairy tales actually existed! Can you imagine it? I'm sick of these boring bloody unicorns flying everywhere!'*

It's no coincidence that people who appreciate traditional stories are often nature lovers. If we can connect with alternate realities within our imaginations, we can build a stronger connection to the natural world in front of us. Unicorns make me appreciate horses and birds. Fairies remind me of children. Goblins could easily be rats (and I love them both)! All that is born within our imagination is firmly rooted in the reality around us.

Of course, there are times when we need to be careful of myths. Myths have been created out of our phobias and fears. Abysmal myths about marginalised groups of people have persisted due to fear and hatred of difference.

In the natural world too, the beautiful native wolf of Britain was driven to extinction partly due to legends of blood-thirsty killer wolves. Many of these tales were probably spun by farmers and hunters who had a vested interest in wiping wolves off the land. As a result, the ecology of Britain is seriously compromised by too many deer who have no natural predators (and yet the British response is to shoot deer, rather than reintroduce the wolf).

It's important to bear this in mind. It is what is underneath a myth or story that is important. Do you feel simply scared after reading or hearing an old nature tale, or did it point to something inspiring and awesome?

I have used story and myth in this chapter as an example of how human imagination intersects with nature and culture. This same principle can be applied to poetry, music, art or any aspect of human creativity. If stories aren't your thing, but art is, delve into that connection. Poetry, for example, has a unique relationship with nature, from the English romantics to the ancient Zen poets of the Far East. If you've felt disconnected from creativity throughout your life, then this is my invitation to you to explore this area of your life.

Our imaginations are powerful—sometimes to our detriment, sometimes to our making. If we can learn to engage with our *creative* imaginations (alongside letting our busy minds rest with mindfulness at other times) we can learn to appreciate this earth from two beautifully diverse and complimentary perspectives.

Exercise: a mythical visualisation

There are more creative/story-based exercises to try out in Chapter Six, but for now, I want you to try this little visualisation. Please read the following invitation slowly and with an open mind:

Imagine you are living in the world of Scottish mythology which I described earlier. Visualise the blue men who float in the sea, the fairy queen who rules the underground, the elf-like brownies who tidy up your house at night. Imagine this is total normality, year in, year out. In this world, you avoid the little blue men when you sail, simply like you might avoid any dangerous animal in nature.

Next, imagine that in this land of Scottish myth, no birds exist. Furthermore, the sky is always a clear white colour, rather than blue. Finally, dogs do not exist.

In your world, people tell ancient folk tales about a magical, mythical land called Earth, where the sky is blue (*'blue, of all colours!'*) and where creatures with feathers and wings called 'birds' fly about the blue sky. These strange little creatures even make little nest-homes in trees.

Folklore also tells of loyal and friendly four-legged animals called 'dogs' who form deep friendships with humans in a way that no animal does in your world.

Close your eyes and inhabit this imaginative land. After a while (30 seconds or more) open your eyes, and reflect on the blue sky, birds and dogs in our world. If you can see/hear/sense any of these, please do right away. If you can't, simply remind yourself of their existence. Invite in your deep appreciation for these miracles.

How do you feel?

4. Compassion for Nature

If you've read this far, you may have noticed that there is an elephant in the room.

It's called the climate emergency.

Engaging in ecotherapy can be a guilt-provoking activity. *Why do I enjoy nature when so much of it is dying? What's the point in loving nature if it's all going to go down the pan?*

For humanity to stop what we are doing to the earth, we need to experience ourselves as a part of nature again. Until I learned to truly love nature as an adult, environmental damage was not an issue that I really cared for. It felt distant. It felt too big for me to take on.

Don't worry, I'm not about to reveal some big ulterior motive here to turn you into an environmental activist. I can't say that I'm one myself (although I greatly admire them). That's not why I wrote this book.

Ecotherapy teaches us to love nature, and when we truly love things, we want to care for those things. Ecotherapy is not just about taking what we can get from nature and giving nothing back. Part of our practice is to take care of our Earth in gratitude for the peace it gives to us.

We all mistreat nature every day — even those who campaign and fight for change. Our entire world system is built on structures that damage nature. While challenging this, we also need to be kind to ourselves and realise that it's currently impossible to be a human on this earth without tainting nature in some way. However, there is still a lot that we can do to improve things if we want to. It starts with empathising with the life around us.

Caring for the environment — in whatever way it happens — is something you will notice you begin to do naturally after a while of practising personal ecotherapy. Enjoying nature is not selfish, pointless or

something to feel guilty about. Human beings are nature too, and we need to heal ourselves if we are to experience compassion for the entire picture.

When we show compassion towards nature and we do things to take care of it (even just little things), we feel good about ourselves. What's more, nature benefits too. No, it's not the urgent response that is needed to halt the desperate situation that we are in. No single response is. But as part of one big Earth movement, ecotherapy is behind the scenes for activism, slowly building up people's love for nature again. If collectively we can halt the damage we are causing, by that point, ecotherapy will (hopefully) be properly established. Perhaps society won't *want* to harm our beautiful land again.

Yes, I am idealistic. I don't know how else I should be. Even in the very worst-case scenario, I feel that if the world is dying, then I'm going to appreciate it with every breath that I have. I honestly don't think that it's selfish to think like that. I think it's respectful.

In many parts of the world, doctors and mental health professionals are beginning to prescribe ecotherapy exercises to patients and clients. That is revolutionary.

In Chapter Six, there are several activities based on thanking nature or giving something back to it. Consider doing them when it feels right, or perhaps consider creating personal and unique ways of thanking nature. Let your connection to nature strengthen first, and the rest will unfold all by itself.

In the meantime, if you are inclined to do something practical to stop the destruction of the earth (alongside your ecotherapy practise), there are no shortage of environmental projects out there that you can support!

5. Approaching Ecotherapy

Choosing exercises

My advice for Chapter Six is simple; read through the exercises in the next chapter in the same way that you have read the rest of this book. Then pick a handful of exercises that you are drawn to and try them out one at a time.

Start by committing to spending time outdoors each day, tuning into your senses and keeping your phone on silent. In terms of the future, it isn't always necessarily a case of saying, 'my walk today is all about doing this one particular task' and focussing on that alone. However, if you're starting to build a deeper nature connection from scratch, it's a good starting approach.

After you have bonded with several exercises, you can switch from doing one or two specific exercises per outing to incorporating them more naturally into your outdoor time. At this point, you can try moving between exercises ad hoc depending on what feels appropriate for the moment/season/weather/location etc. It's also a good idea to try out new exercises from time to time (or create your own, which happens naturally) to keep things interesting.

Most of the ecotherapy exercises in Chapter Six are simple and straightforward. When I recommend moving from one exercise to another, this may be as simple as concentrating on your shadow in the sun for a few minutes, before listening out for birds for a few minutes after that, and then spending the rest of your time looking for the colour yellow in nature.

If an exercise doesn't relate to a specific season, place, weather condition or time and you find that it works for you, try it in different locations and at different times. For example, if you really enjoy writing a tiny poem when you're sitting on top of a hill, try it another time by the sea, or in your local park. Many exercises are adaptable to all kinds of different

locations and times.

Don't worry if many of the exercises don't appeal to you. It may be that you are drawn to do creative exercises in nature rather than mindfulness-based ones, or vice versa. That's fine. If a disability or sensory impairment makes an exercise impossible, then simply ignore it. However you bond with nature is magical, and finding your path should be a positive experience, not a frustrating or alienating one.

Having said all of this, after you've started with some appealing exercises and you feel that you are getting on well, I invite you to try out some exercises that you dislike the look of too. If you have an aversion to a specific exercise, it can be interesting to ask ourselves: what's behind this aversion? For example, 'why don't I like paying attention to the wind?'

When I was training to become an ecotherapist with the Tariki Trust, one of the most powerful exercises for me was one where I had to try something that provoked a little bit of fear. I dangled my legs over the edge of the local harbour (I was a bit afraid of the open sea at the time). I had a beautiful experience watching the calm water of the open sea rippling beneath me. A seagull floated in the wind above me, apparently for the joy of floating, seemingly at peace. I'm not afraid of the sea any more.

The exercises introduced in the next chapter barely scratch the surface of the therapeutic activities that can be done outdoors. They are not scientific tasks to be done with precision. If you are doing an exercise with a tree for example, but you get distracted by a little insect and you begin to follow its track, keep on following it! Despite what I mentioned earlier about the pitfalls of distraction, if *nature* is distracting you from nature, then that's usually okay!

The exercises are suggestions; invitations. If you can find other ways of doing some of them that work better for you, then by all means get creative. Just be mindful when altering exercises, and question your motives. Will changing them help you to connect more deeply to nature, or is your subconscious trying to avoid doing an exercise that might be

good for you? (My subconscious mind has a very lazy streak so I know what I'm talking about!) However you bond, I just want you to enjoy this gorgeous planet in whatever way works for you. Be creative and have fun.

For obvious reasons, the majority of exercises are designed to take place outdoors. However, there are some exercises that you can do indoors, or might even engage with better indoors (you'll understand when you read them). Ecotherapy doesn't have to stop when you are at home.

A tip for wandering minds

Please remember this basic mindfulness mantra when doing the exercises: 'when your mind wanders, don't get annoyed with yourself, just gently bring your mind back to the exercise'.

Our minds wander all the time. It's what human minds do best. A simple way to focus a wandering mind is to focus solely on your breath going in and out of your body three or four times (or longer if necessary), and then to return to the task when your mind is clearer.

Ecotherapy is not a linear path leading to enlightenment or some permanent heavenly state. It's not expected that one day you will have done enough tasks to experience bliss in nature every time. I wish it worked like that, but nope! It requires dedication. For example, writing this book has made my personal ecotherapy practice challenging, because every time I bond with nature my mind begins writing a paragraph about the very thing I'm experiencing. I simply take some deep breaths and come back to nature again. And again. And again. It's sometimes relentless, but it's also simple, rewarding, and far nicer than following my thoughts unquestioningly, experiencing no nature at all.

To be frustrated with yourself for having a wandering mind is to be frustrated with yourself for being a human being. Be kind to yourself. If you find it really hard to engage with nature sometimes, that's okay — that's life.

Like all worthwhile relationships in life, the important thing is not to give

up on your relationship with nature when it feels hard. There is so much richness to be found. Even if during a 30-minute walk, you feel as if you spent just a few minutes paying deep attention to nature, then that is a few wonderful minutes that can truly boost the rest of your day.

Powerful experiences in nature, even small ones, offer us faith in something beautiful that supports us when we're struggling with life. We create very real memories and glimpses of wonder that help us through rougher times.

Final tips

Professor Miles Richardson recently found in his 'nature connectedness research' that there are five key areas where the deepest nature connections happen. At times when it feels hard for you to connect with ecotherapy activities, it may be helpful to ask yourself the following prompts:

- How does this feel in my **senses** (how does it feel, taste, smell, sound, look...)?
- What **emotions** do I feel when doing this exercise?
- Am I able to find **beauty**?
- Do I find **meaning** in this experience?
- Do I feel **compassion** for nature when doing this?

Finally, if you are able to invest and you want to take things further, consider searching for a local ecotherapist/nature therapist to work with. Sometimes an ecotherapist is what is needed to really help us to reconnect, especially if there are big issues going on in our lives. If none are living near to you, there are online ecotherapy practitioners like myself who you can meet via video call to create a personal programme of nature exploration together.

Whether you do you work alone or with a therapist, now is the time to go forth, dive into the deep grass, and enjoy nature!

6. Ecotherapy Exercises

Many of the exercises listed here have been practised by human beings for as long as we have existed as a species.

Some of the exercises have been adapted from my ecotherapy training with the Tariki Trust. These exercises are marked with '*TT'.

Several are inspired by the wonderful book 'With Nature in Mind' by Andy McGeeney — a training manual for ecotherapists. These exercises are marked with '*AM'.

Wherever I have been inspired by an exercise from a particular source, I have given credit to that source. If no credit is given, that means that it is an exercise that I chanced upon through bonding with nature personally, or by working with clients. Some have been adapted from Buddhist practises and applied to nature.

1. Body Movement

Pay attention to the way your body moves when you are outdoors; the feeling of your muscles and bones when you walk, and any physical sensations going on in your body. You are more than your mind. Experience the outdoors with your entire body.

2. The Moon

Pay close attention to the Moon, with all of your attention on it for around 5-10 minutes. Can you notice it moving slowly after a while? Contemplate that big beautiful rock, reflecting the Sun's light. You can do this outdoors or from your home if it's visible through a window. If you enjoy this exercise, consider tracking the Moon's phases with a moon calendar.

3. The Day Sky

Watch the sky in the daytime. Fix your eyes in one place, and spend at least two minutes looking up at what's going on up there. Are clouds

floating by, and if so, how quickly do they move? What colour is the sky? Try doing it on different days, noticing the different ways you feel when the sky is in other states. How might the conditions in the sky affect your mood daily without you realising? *AM

4. Nature Journaling

Keep a nature journal and jot down all of your nature observations. It can be as in-depth or as vague as you like. Write in it regularly, or from time to time; whatever works for you. *TT

5. Three Good Things In Nature

Look for 'three good things in nature' every day for a week, or longer. A 'good thing' can be anything at all from the natural world, for example, a view, an animal, a dry leaf, scent or the feeling of the wind. If you have a nature journal, write about your experiences there, exploring your relationship to them. *from <https://findingnature.org.uk/>

6. Hello, Tree

Get to know a tree you've never paid close attention to before. Appreciate it in as many ways as you can. Look at it from a distance, noticing its branches and the individual way it has grown. Does the way it has grown make you think of anything in your own life? Go up close. Feel its bark. Smell it. What are its leaves like? If you can see anything living here, what is it doing? If you can't, what can you imagine might live here? Why were you drawn to this particular tree?

7. Birds

Give all of your attention to birds for around ten minutes or longer. Every time your mind wanders, come back to the sight and sound of birds. Can you see or hear any? Do you like some species of bird more than others? If so, why might that be? Question where your attitudes toward certain species come from.

8. Photo Changes

Take a walk somewhere that is easy to revisit. Find a view that you like. Stop to take it all in. Take a photo. Go back every week for four weeks and take another photo each time. Compare the photos at home and notice

the changes taking place in nature. (If you remember to, you can even go back later in the year to notice bigger changes) *TT

9. Spot the Colour

Go for a walk and look out for natural things which are of one particular colour. For example, look for everything that's blue on a walk. Don't pick the most obvious colour (for example, green might be everywhere if you are in a forest). What things do you see that you might not have noticed otherwise? *TT

10. Spot the Shape

Do task 9, but instead of looking for colour, look for particular shapes, e.g. find circular or triangular shapes that have been created by nature. *TT

11. Not Naming Things

Take a walk and try your best not to name things, e.g. 'a tree', 'a bird' etc. Approach each thing as a living being in a unique form. Look closely at things you might usually ignore. Practise unlearning for a little while.

12. Look Towards the New

Take a walk somewhere where you go often, and give attention to your regular habits. Notice your walking habits closely, and how you often look at the same things without being aware. Deliberately shift your attention elsewhere, and look in directions you usually wouldn't look. What new things can you see?

13. Barefoot

Walk barefoot on a soft — and safe — outdoor surface such as grass or sand. Pay full attention to the feel of your feet against the ground. Alternatively, do a barefoot meditation, where you sit with eyes closed or lowered, putting all of your focus on your bare feet connecting to the earth for as long as you can.

14. Like and Dislike

Find two natural objects, e.g. a stick, stone or feather etc. Find one you are drawn to, and one you dislike. Take them home and ponder (or

journal) on where your feelings about these things might have come from. Keep the object that you like and treasure it somewhere special at home. Throw away the thing that you dislike (outdoors), visualising yourself releasing something that you no longer welcome in your life.

*Inspired by art therapist Alison Wren
(<https://arttherapywithalison.com/>)

15. Outdoor Home

Visit a park or a natural space. Find a place that feels like somewhere you would call home if you were a wild animal. Stay there for 30 minutes. Sit down, perhaps making some notes in a journal (although it's not necessary). Consider what attracted you to this place; is it sheltered or open? What is the view like? Why here, and not in another spot nearby? Learn about yourself from your choice.

16. Photo Surprises

Take a photo of a place you like outdoors. Later, look at the photo. What things didn't you notice when you were there? How does looking at the photo compare to actually being there?

17. Twilight

On a clear morning or evening, watch dusk or dawn. Pay attention to how twilight makes you feel. Keep your mind as still as possible, and simply watch the sun rise or set.

18. Winter Differences

Take a winter trip and go to a place that you wouldn't usually visit at this time of year (for example a beach, picnic area etc). How is it here at this time of year?

19. A Summer's Day

Find an online recording of Mary Oliver's poem 'A Summer's Day', and listen to it outdoors in spring or summer. Take a printed copy of the poem with you if you would prefer to read it. If you haven't read/heard this poem before, save it until you get to your destination.

20. Tiny Life, Expansive View

Find an outdoor space where you feel comfortable sitting for a while; somewhere with plants and earth. Spend a few minutes specifically focussing in on the tiny life you can find; this includes grass and plants as well as any insects you can see. How does it feel to be so much taller than these life forms? After a while, look up to the sky, and consider vastness. How does it feel to be so large, and then so small, in such a short space of time?

21. Nature Reclaiming Space

Take a city/town walk where there is lots of concrete, and look for the weeds and wildflowers popping up through the pavement and walls. How often can you spot nature appearing through the cracks?

22. Morning Images

Go outside and find a natural item that you are drawn to; something small that you can carry home. Question how this thing might have come into being. Leave this item by your bedside, or somewhere where you will see it first thing in the morning. Spend a moment looking at your natural item before leaving the bedroom area. Visualise the place where you found it. Contemplate your earlier thoughts regarding how it came into existence. Do this every morning for a week.

23. Letting Go

Take the item from exercise 22 outside with you, or another natural item that you own and like. Thank it for the inspiration, and give it back to nature. How does it feel to let it go? Does your reaction mirror any of your general behaviours in life? (If you can't bring yourself to let it go, this is totally fine, but is there anything you can learn within this process?)

24. Childhood Stories

Go for a walk, and invite into your mind myths, stories or fairy tales from your childhood. Specifically recall stories that had strong links to nature, perhaps featuring animals, caves, forests, hills, mythical beings, the ocean etc. Explore how you feel as the stories surface. When you get back home, ponder how childhood stories may have influenced your experience of nature. Seek out the stories that you recall and read them again *TT

25. Conjuring Stories

Go for a walk and let your surroundings inspire you to make up a story. Create a character/mythological creature/animal who you would like to be friends with. What are they doing out here? You don't have to write your story down (although you can if you want), and it doesn't have to be fully formed. It can be as simple as, 'that bridge is where an angry fairy lives'. What might your story represent about you? How might it reflect how you see your surroundings?

26. Local Legends

Research a local nature-based myth, folk tale or fairy tale that you have never encountered before. It may be within your local district, or more broadly from your country. What do you think inspired this myth or story? *TT

27. Mind Seeds

Listen to a guided nature-based meditation at home. Let yourself really imagine being in the natural land described to you. There are several such downloads free on my website at naturetherapyonline.net. How does it feel to plant 'nature seeds' in your mind, even from indoors?

28. Water Falls from the Sky

At an opportune time, sit quietly and appreciate the sound of rain falling against your roof or window. Close your eyes, clear your mind, and contemplate nothing but the fact that water is falling from the sky.

29. Sound Only

Open a window or go outside, and listen to everything in your soundscape. Focus only on sound for as long as you can. How many sounds are natural sounds? If everything sounds as if it comes from human or machines, stick with it anyway. How long is it until you hear something from nature? How long can you focus on your sense of hearing for?

30. Waves

Visit the seaside. Spend as long as you can in silence, listening to nothing

but the sound of waves. Every now and then bring to mind the fact that humans evolved from tiny sea creatures millions of years ago.

31. Running Water

Visit a river or stream, and sit there for as long as you can. Pay attention to nothing but the running water. If you can get close, touch the water. Pay attention to the water's temperature, and watch closely for any life that is living in the water, or life that is relying on it in any way.

32. Rocks and Stones

Take a strong bag and collect rocks and large stones. Notice their different patterns. Acknowledge that they may have taken millions of years to arrive here with you in this form. Make something creative with them, such as a rock collage or a garden display, or find household uses for them such as door stops etc *TT

33. Watching the World

Next time you are about to kill time by watching something on your laptop or phone, find a live stream of the view of Earth from outer space (eg NASA's live stream). Be sure to find a video with no distracting speech. Watch it for as long as you can, and treat it as a visual meditation. How does it feel to ponder yourself living your life here, now, on that globe?

34. Wheel of the Year

Find a copy of the Pagan 'Sabbat Wheel' or 'Wheel Of The Year' calendar. Make a note of the next seasonal holiday. Do something to mark and celebrate the changes taking place on Earth when the holiday comes (there are plenty of suggestions online, including rituals and ceremonies, if that appeals to you).

35. Sketch

Go outdoors and sketch a natural object that you like. Don't judge the result, just pay attention to how you feel when you sketch something natural.

36. Litter Picking

Go for a litter-picking trip in a local area that looks messy. Pay attention to how you feel when you do this, and to any reactions that people have to you. Return the following day and notice how you respond to being back in the space you have previously tidied. *TT

37. An Offering

Make a symbolic offering to a place in nature that feels special to you. For example, find a stone that you like, and take it to a place that you feel especially connected to. How does it feel to honour nature in this way?

38. Let it Burn

Make a safe little fire (carefully) and visualise yourself letting go of your negative thoughts as the smoke disappears into the atmosphere.

39. The Wind

Go outdoors when it's windy and focus on the impact that the wind has on all of your senses. How does it move things in nature? How does it feel against your face? What is the temperature like? Does the air have a scent? How does it sound?

40. Shadow Walking

On a sunny day, walk with your back to the sun. Put all of your attention on the sight of your shadow. As you walk, contemplate that your form was not always here, and will not always be here. Contemplate how it came into being and is part of the Earth's movement.

41. Stop and Smell

At random intervals, stop and really tune into your sense of smell. It may seem at first that there is no smell around, but dig deeper, or go closer to things. How do different scents impact your emotions? How might they be affecting you subconsciously without you realising?

42. Free Food

Find a written guide to foraging for natural foods that grow in your part of the world. Please be very careful not to eat anything poisonous! Discover something that grows nearby that you can eat, even if it is a simple herb. Make a meal or snack with your local ingredient.

43. Tiny Poem

Sit in nature and write a short, one-line poem about the most beautiful thing you encounter.

44. Who Do I Live With?

Spend time investigating the corners and edges of your house, inside and out. See if you can find any signs of small life such as insects living with you. Notice their behaviour and any reactions you have to them living in the same space as you.

45. Grow Something Simple

If you're not already a gardener, grow something small and simple in a little pot. You might even use seeds that are lying around the house as food ingredients. Notice how you feel watching it grow. Take notes of anything unexpected you notice. What do you want to do with it when it's grown? (You can find simple growing instructions online). *TT

46. Sleep Outside

If you have a safe outdoor space to do so, spend a night sleeping outside on a summer's evening (appropriately dressed for the weather and cosy of course).

47. Mind That Bug

Go for a walk in a green space and try not to damage life (such as insects and plants) as you walk. How does it affect your speed, movement etc?

48. Calm Your Mind

Take up a regular meditation practice. Take your meditations outdoors as well as indoors.

49. Talking Nature

Agree with a friend that you will go for a walk together and focus the conversation entirely on what you both experience in nature. Speak to each other only to discuss what you experience in the outdoor world. Be silent for the rest of the time. *Inspired by Alasdair Taylor's PRANA Ecotherapy course

50. Find a Mini-World

Find a miniature world outdoors; a place where tiny beings live amongst small plants. Take some photos of it. Create a poem, story or piece of art honouring this place. *TT

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