

# Ecotherapy

Martin Jordan Counselling Psychologist,  
Psychotherapist, Course Leader  
Psychodynamic Counselling University  
of Brighton

# Ecopsychology

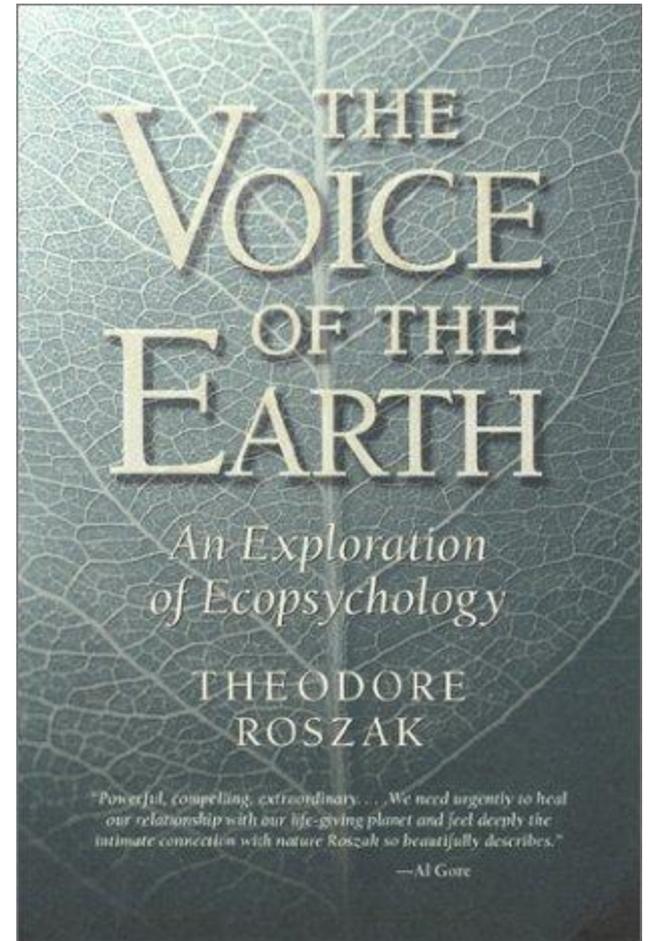
Starting assumption: 'there is a deeply bonded and reciprocal communion between humans and nature. The denial of this bond is a source of suffering for both for the physical environment and for the human psyche, and the realization of the connection between humans and nature is healing for both' (Davis 1998: 5)

# Ecopsychology

A young (sub) discipline – teenage years

Roszak (1992) *Voice of the Earth* key starting point; Roszak et al (1995) *Ecopsychology*

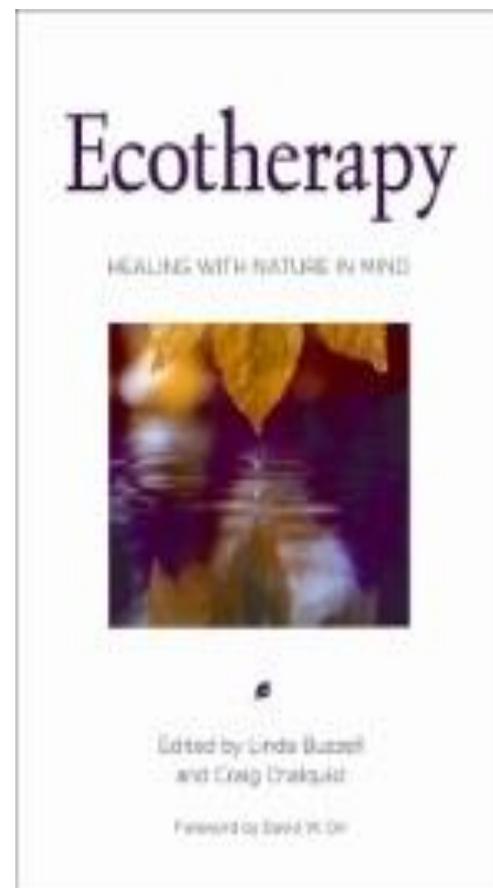
Ecopsychologists subscribe 'to the tenet that humans are integrally connected to nature' (St. John & Macdonald 2007, 48)





# Ecotherapy – Buzzell and Chalquist

- Ecotherapy is an umbrella term for nature-based methods of physical and psychological healing, it represents a new form of psychotherapy that acknowledges the vital role of nature and addresses the human nature relationship.
- Ecotherapists are expanding notions of 'therapy' from the idea of distress as an intrapsychic, biomedical interior experience, to a systemic and holistic understanding that at its heart is about reciprocal interdependence with nature and the healing affects of this.



# Biophilia

- The Biophilia hypothesis defined by Edward O'Wilson (Wilson 1984) is the innate tendency to focus on life and life like processes, Wilson believed that we were biologically programmed in terms of genetics to seek kinship with the more than human world
- Kellert (1993) proposes that the biophilia hypothesis suggests human identity and personal fulfilment somehow depend on our relationship to nature. The human need for nature is linked not just to the material exploitation of the environment but also to the influence the natural world has on our emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, and even spiritual development.

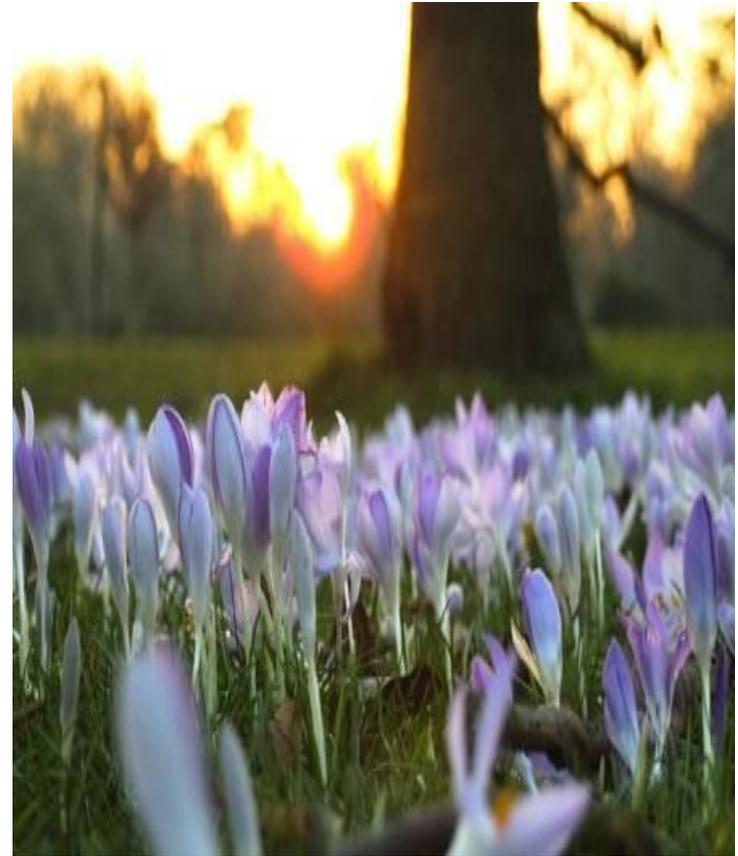
# Psychoevolutionary theory of stress reduction

- Ulrich (1984) and Verderber (1986) found that the quality and content of the view from a hospital window, had a significant affect on a patient's recovery, the nature content fostered a quicker recovery post surgery



# Attention Restoration Theory (ART)

- Focusing on the process of attention, Kaplan and Kaplan (1995) and Kaplan (1995) have researched the restorative effects of the natural environment resulting in 'Attention Restoration Theory'. They undertook research which explored the psychological effects of being in both wilderness and nearby nature such as parks and woodland.
- Being in natural environments involves a different sort of cognitive functioning indirect attention or what is termed 'soft' fascination (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). Soft fascination is maintained in an aesthetic and sensory contact with the natural world, by being away from the routines of our day to day life



# Emotional geography

- The field is concerned with the spatiality and temporality of emotions and the way they become attached around and within certain places. A place becomes important because of its emotional associations, emotional geography attempts to understand how emotion both experientially and conceptually is understood in a socio-spatial way rather than as an entirely interiorised subjective mental state (Bondi et al 2007).



# Video

- <https://vimeo.com/124416444>

# Psychotherapeutic Understanding



- Searles (1960) proposed that although essential psychodynamic concepts were contained within Freud's writings he failed, as have subsequent others since, to explicitly acknowledge the significance of the non-human environment in the development of human psychological life. Searles raises the importance in infant development of the relationship with both the mother and what Searles terms the 'non-human environment'.

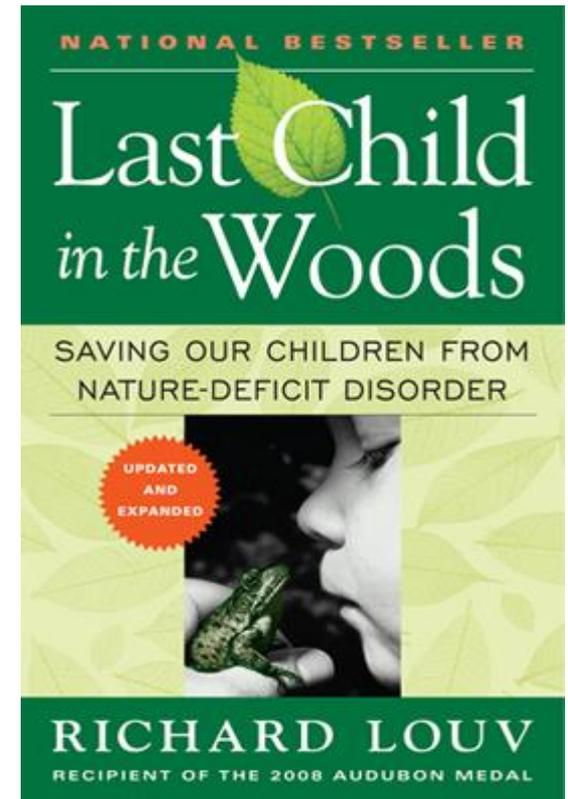


# Children and nature

The ecological self develops alongside the object relational self  
Anita Barrows – ‘the ecopsychology of the child’

We need to expand our notions of ‘object relations’ to encompass the natural world

Relational Psychotherapy including relationships to the natural world



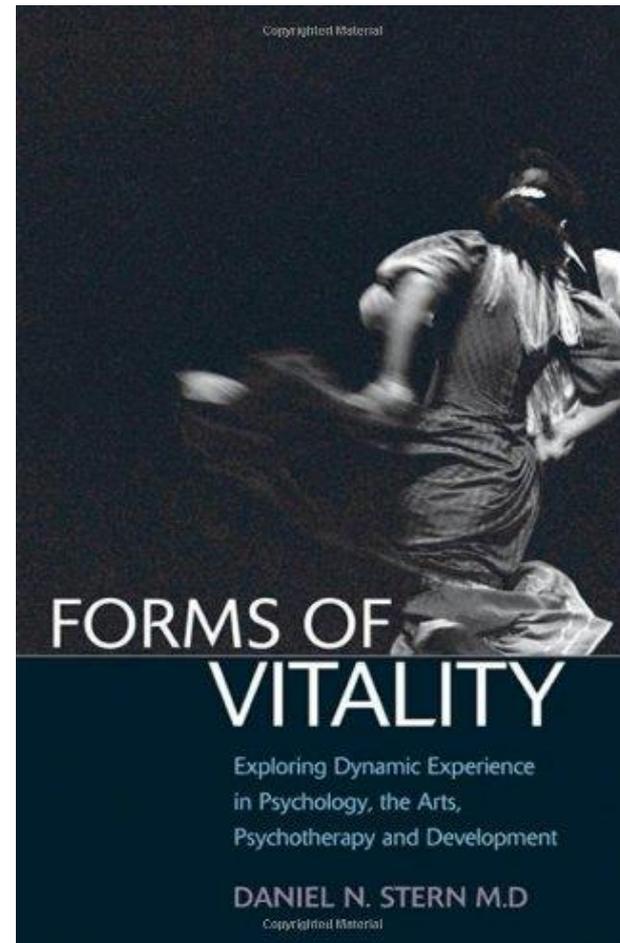
# What is Nature? - Vitalism

- Its central premise was that life cannot be explained by the mechanistic processes advocated in certain forms of scientific and biological theorising, in particular Darwinian, Newtonian and Cartesian. Calkins (1919) outlines some of the fundamental differences between mechanism and vitalism. Mechanism she argues, describes the universe in structural terms, vitalism in contrast explains the universe in terms of relations.



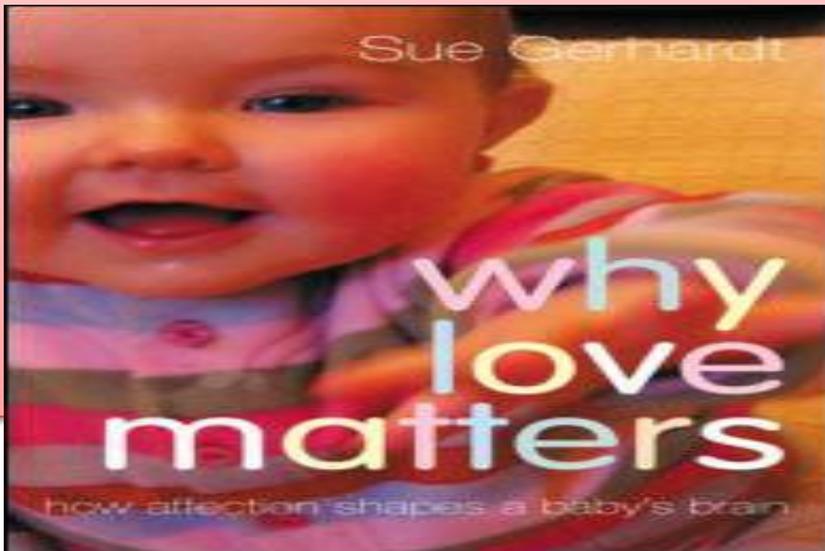
# Vitalism and Psychotherapy

- Stern (2010) defines vitality as a manifestation of being alive and essential to human experience, something distinct from known physical, chemical and mental forces. Drawing from the original ideas of vitalism as a dynamic teleology, a moving unfolding and relational force of becoming, vitality is positioned as a constant sense of movement which maintains our sense of being alive. Rather than forms of internal mental representation driving action and thought, action is based on feeling states, sensate connections of relations, and a dynamic unfolding of relationships between internal and external, between humans and the wider world around them (Ingold, 2011).

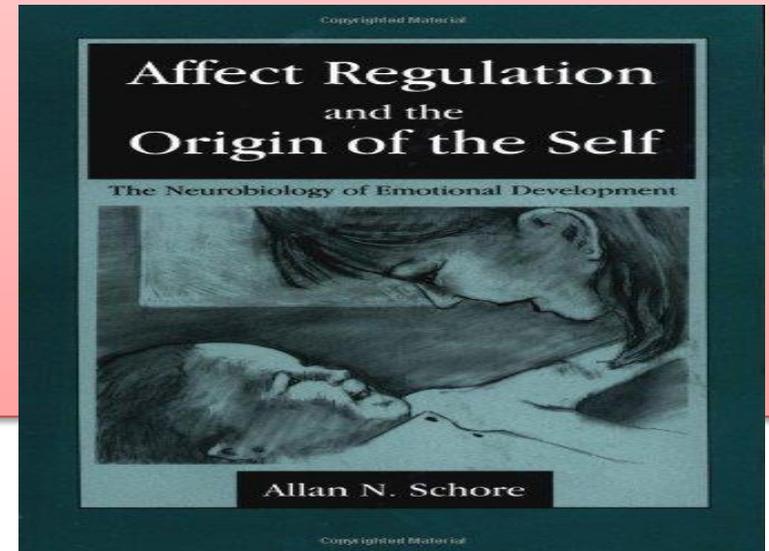


# Nature, transitional space, affect attunement

- Winnicott (1958) has articulated the idea of emotional space in early infant development. In his theory of transitional phenomena and transitional objects, he identifies the importance of the growing relationship to interior emotional and exterior emotional spaces for the baby



- Allows for the concept of emotional space which can exist between the internal and external, the subjective and objective, the mother and the infant. This helps us to start to imagine other forms of emotionality which can exist within and between geographical and relational 'spaces', and between mind and nature.



# Case Example

- *Duncan was a trainee solicitor who had presented for therapy his previous experiences of therapy had been difficult, Duncan reporting that the therapist had put him in touch with feelings that were very difficult and that he didn't know what to do with. At assessment Duncan talked about his family history, his mother and father's marriage had been volatile and unstable with numerous splits and walkouts, his mother had been self-obsessed using her children in a narcissistic way to meet her own needs. Duncan had grown up with a poor sense of himself, quite often adapting himself to others needs and wishes in order to be liked. He was mistrustful and the therapist assessing him had a strong counter transference feeling that he was attacking and persecuting Duncan through his questions. There were long pauses and silences in the subsequent sessions and Duncan reported feeling very ambivalent about therapy. The therapist suggested they might meet outdoors and walk together as the sessions indoors felt so difficult and for them both to see how this felt. They met on a beach and walked and talked by the sea. In the session Duncan talked more about how he felt and the session went well, at the end the therapist asked Duncan how he felt about this way of working. Duncan reported that he found it 'much easier' to talk without the room and the eye contact of the therapist and that compared to his previous experiences of therapy it was much easier to open up and share with the therapist outdoors whilst they were walking. In subsequent sessions they met in coastal locations and walked and talked, the therapist also found it easier to tune into Duncan on an embodied level and make contact with him more easily than they had done indoors. At times Duncan would stop and make eye contact with the therapist when he had a particularly important thing to say in therapy, as the sessions progressed Duncan was more able to initiate contact in this way in the therapy and begun to be more able to stay in touch with painful feelings whilst moving outdoors.*

# Attachment to nature

- Spend a little time thinking about your historical relationship with nature.
- What role has it played in your emotional wellbeing?
- How do you currently make connections to the natural world and how important is this for your mental wellbeing?

# Taking therapy outside



# Research Questions

- Why do counsellors and psychotherapists take their therapy practice into outdoor natural settings?
- What happens for counsellors and psychotherapists who have been trained to practice indoors when they take their practice into natural outdoor settings?
- How have counsellors taking their practice into natural outdoor settings adapted (or not) their practices to suit the new setting?
- **In addressing these questions what then may emerge are some final issues for the research to address:**
- How might taking therapy into outdoor natural settings contribute to knowledge in the wider field of counselling and psychotherapy particularly in relation to existing therapeutic theories, models and practices?
- How might the finding contribute to an enhanced understanding of aspects of human nature relationships and the therapeutic effect of the natural world?

# Beginnings and endings



Beginning and ending the session outdoors is an aspect of the unique way the work is set up in an outdoor space. Without the confines of a room with a door, where the therapist or the agency they are working in may also possibly have a waiting room for the client to sit in before the session starts, meant that the therapist was faced with the challenge how to begin the therapy, how to mark the space where therapy started (and also finished).

# Case Example

- *A therapist and client met in a car park by some woods. After greeting one another they began to walk down a track; as they started on the track the therapist asked the client to just bring themselves into the space by breathing and slowing down in silence as they walked, the therapist then pointed to two trees further down the track, saying 'when we walk between those two trees we'll begin the session proper', they then began the session as they passed by. And again on the return the same trees denoted the finish of the session. The client and therapist parted ways in the car park saying goodbye.*

# Being Mindful



- Being mindful was another way for the therapists to denote the space for therapy and also to start to begin to link an internal process to an external space. The importance of doing this mindfully was to facilitate clients to calm down and start to tune in in a different way, quite often this involved stopping talking and being silent to allow this transition to happen.

# Confidentiality in outdoor settings



**BREATHING SPACE  
IS CLOSED**

**(WORKSHOP IN PROGRESS)**

**DO NOT DISTURB**

**PLEASE USE AN ALTERNATIVE ROUTE**

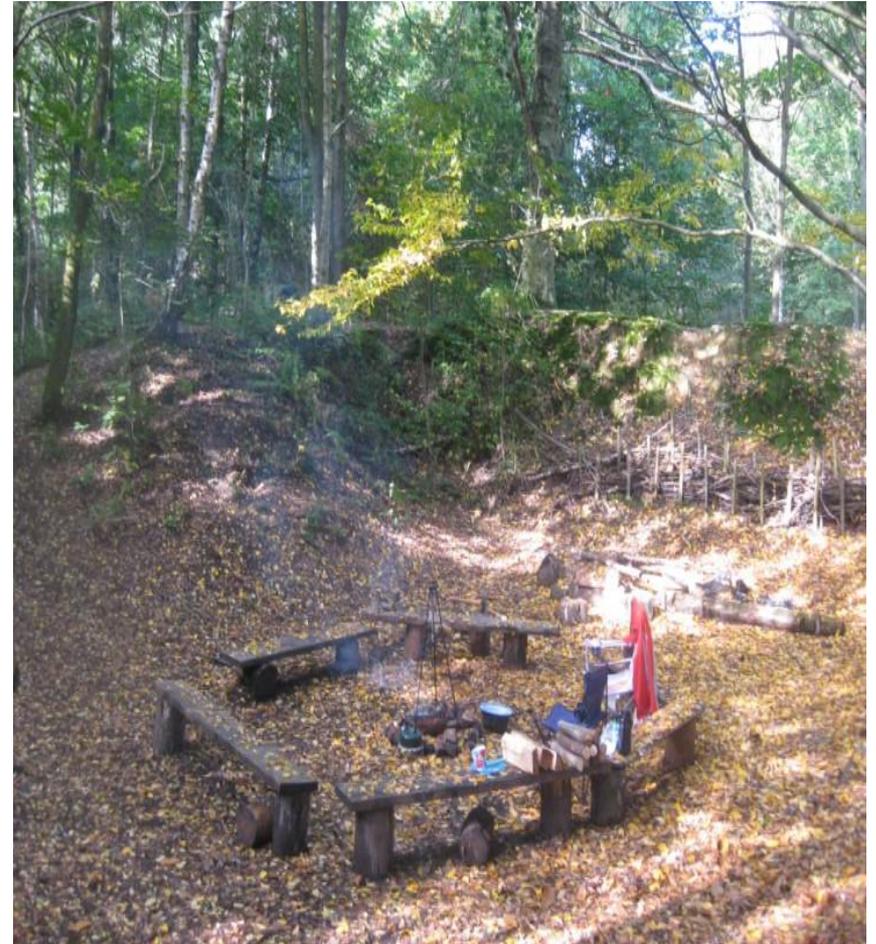
**THANKYOU**

# Case Example

- *A therapist and client were sitting in their usual spot where their sessions took place. This was a spot known to the therapist as in another role she worked as a volunteer conservation worker, she knew the space well, knowing they were unlikely to be disturbed. However on this particular occasion a group of volunteers were working nearby, they came over to check a track and to clear some dead branches, they were then in sight of both therapist and client. The therapist realised she knew some of them and they were likely to come over and say hello. Having contracted for these sorts of possibilities the therapist discussed moving with the client but the client decided it was o.k. to stay. The therapist then got up and briefly said hello to the workers whilst the client sat and waited, in doing this pre-empting any interruptions to the session and the volunteers moved away to work somewhere else. The therapist and client then continued with the session.*

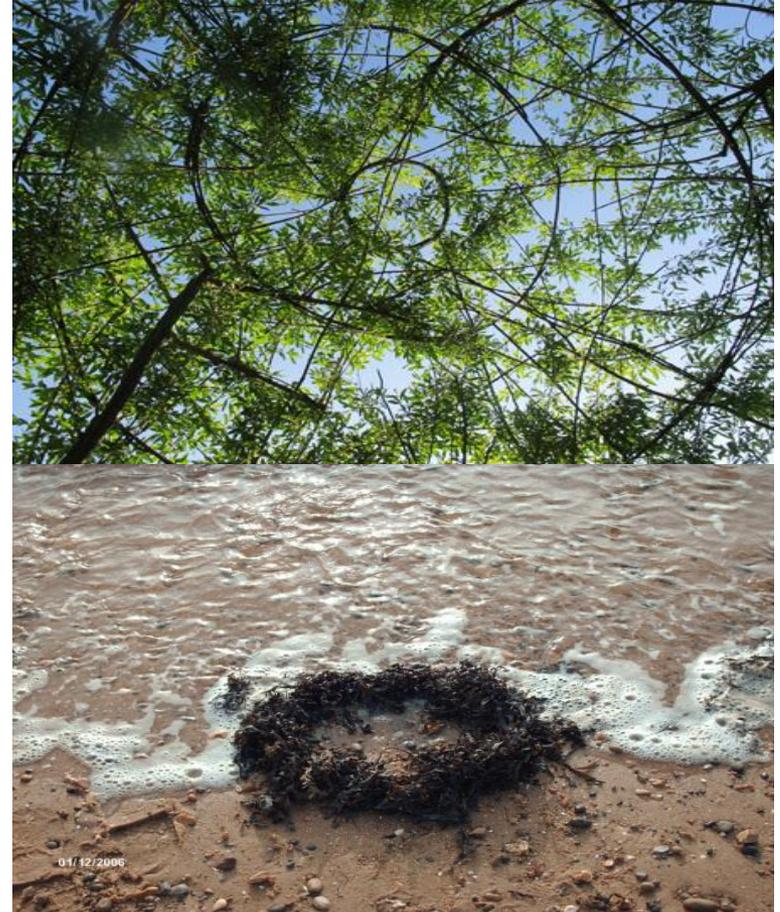
# Frame issues

- Assessing clients
- Timing of sessions
- Maintaining boundaries
- Negotiating around the weather
- The frame and the psychological state of the therapist

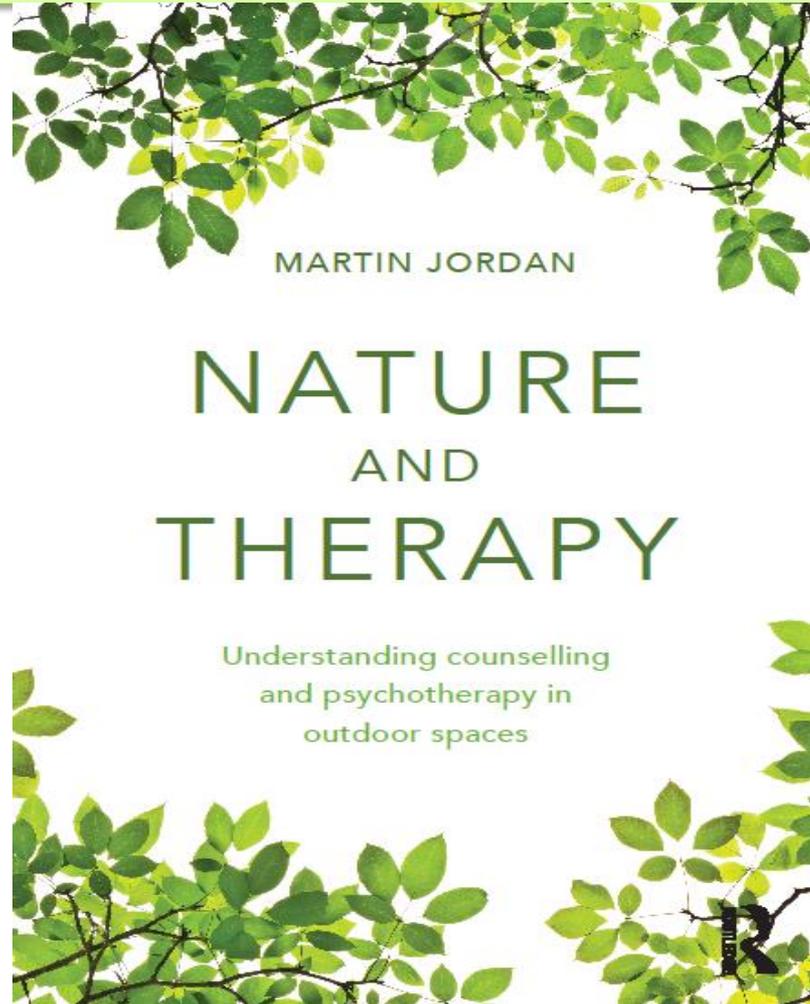


# Therapeutic processes

- Participation
- Projection – metaphor, living processes
- Personal – existential, seasonal, living and dying
- Transpersonal – ecological



# New Book Autumn 2014



# Ecotherapy Events

- Ongoing support for therapists – Fridays
- Intensive weekend training sept 2014
- Day workshop on ecotherapy – 14<sup>th</sup> June
- Conference University of Brighton Friday 20<sup>th</sup> June on Ecotherapy/ Nature Based Therapy
- Ecotherapy website [www.ecotherapy.org.uk](http://www.ecotherapy.org.uk)