

Book review: With nature in mind: The ecotherapy manual for mental health professionals

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Book Review

With Nature in Mind: The Ecotherapy Manual for Mental Health Professionals, by Andy McGeeney, London, Jessica Kingsley, 2016, 336 pp., £18.33 (paperback), ISBN 978-1785920240

'With Nature in Mind' is a useful introduction to ecotherapy which provides a number of practical, accessible and cost-effective ways of doing ecotherapy within mental health, mindfulness training or wildlife education contexts. The author, Andy McGeeney, is a highly experienced outdoor, wildlife and ecotherapist practitioner and offers a way of doing ecotherapy that does not require the reader or implementer to be a therapist. These kinds of books are not abundantly available but can often provide the 'know-how' to start a new kind of working with people in our services and societies. Offering a narrative that can be read in full, but also providing simple and accessible practical information on how to do ecotherapy, this book will not age quickly. Whilst a more in-depth book is likely to be required, for academics or researchers, it is an ideal book for mental health and health practitioners, including those outdoor or wildlife practitioners who want to broaden their reach and impact, and is applicable to most international environments. As a nature enthusiast, nature connection and wellbeing researcher, and outdoor leader, I was particularly interested in this book and enjoyed the read!

The approach to ecotherapy provided is holistic, promoting balance and harmony with ourselves, our lifestyles and our environment and in doing so, aims to alleviate the ever increasing stresses and anxieties of this world; in the process addressing people's health, wellbeing and pro-environmental behaviour. The activities are outdoor based, involve those who are experiencing mental health issues, those who are not, are aimed to be service user led, to build self-esteem, and are designed to be sustainable and enduring. Over 100 flexible methods and activities with useful codes are explained and a good awareness of the shifting ways that activities can be experienced at different times of the year are acknowledged and discussed. Such nuanced complexity can be overlooked by some, so it is refreshing to see it addressed in this book.

The book establishes quickly and appropriately how ecotherapy provides a meaningful alternative to medical approaches and clearly demonstrates the need for such an approach within a society of ever increasing psychological distress and ill-health. How ecotherapy is situated in the plethora of other outdoor and nature based approaches and under the 'green care' umbrella is explained simply, enabling the reader to further develop their idea of what ecotherapy is and does. For McGeeney, his ecotherapy is about "creating a closer connection to nature and feeling better for it" (p.29), but it is at this stage, however, I feel there was a missed opportunity to show and explain the connections and overlap between the 'green care' approaches and ecotherapy, particularly in relation to the ecotherapy approach that McGeeney offers, for example, do not all of the 'green care' methods aim for people to gain a greater connection to nature and 'feel better for it'? If such broad phrasing is to be used - phrasing that can be related to all forms of ecotherapy and green care - and a 'particular approach' is to be offered then it needs to be clearly stated and delineated from other ecotherapy approaches. Greater discussion and clearer comparisons would be useful to the reader and a simple summary box or paragraph about what kind of ecotherapy is being offered (for example, before going onto listing the activities) may well have diminished this ambiguity.

Ambiguity continues in other forms in this book as there is a movement from being overly simplistic to somewhat pedantic and dogmatic at times. This is particularly so when discussing the philosophy of the book around 'the problem of the mind' and spirituality.

Chapter 3 starts to explore this 'problem of the mind' further but it only goes so far and offers unsubstantiated reasons for the stance approach and seems to encourage practitioners, or those who choose to use the manual, to deny the existence of mental illness or at least diminish its meaning to individuals and society. These are quite bold statements and have implications that both warrant further discussion and review of the literature and research. Similarly, when the idea of spirituality is challenged, in that the term is too burdened with religious connotation, there is little evidence used to support this and a move towards the use of 'transpersonal' instead is made. Transpersonal works, but it seems limiting to discount spirituality in this way. I consider myself spiritual but in no way do I attach myself to a religion or have religious beliefs and I know many that feel the same way. It may have been more beneficial, therefore, to have seen a re-specification of the term 'spirituality' instead of confining it to, and critiquing it based upon, its traditional meaning.

Other areas that warranted further discussion and clarification included the distinction between 'therapy' and 'therapeutic'. The latter is particularly important when the very name of the approach - ecotherapy - has 'therapy' in it and has implications around how such an approach is applied and communicated to clients, councils, NHS and funding providers. Additionally, it is disappointing to see that the activities at the end of the book do not clearly demonstrate all the characteristics of ecotherapy that are set out clearly at the start of the book, regarding inclusivity, monitoring and evaluation. Despite the effort, time and space given to providing and explaining 'the evidence' for the benefits of connecting people to nature, little evidence is offered that supports the usefulness and effectiveness of the activities presented in this book. This is particularly pertinent when statements are made that "all our work is monitored and evaluated" (p.28).

In terms of inclusivity, the book would have also benefited from a greater discussion around how ecotherapy, particularly the approach offered, is inclusive and greater attention around the language used needed to be demonstrated. For example, although people of low income and those who physically cannot or wish not to go outdoors are considered, many of the activities require mobility' which excludes those who are not mobile but nevertheless enjoy and want to be in the outdoors. Those with physical disabilities need to be acknowledged more and, although activities that are sedentary are provided, people with disabilities should not be excluded from movement within and greater exposure to nature. In this light, adapting to the "needs of the moment" (p.153) is important, but I would argue that the needs of the client or service user also need to be acknowledged and responded to more clearly and specifically within the book. Greater discussion around these issues at the start of the book and a pre-cursor section to the activities chapter, stating how to make the activities more inclusive, would be beneficial.

This critique does not diminish the overall value of the book however, and is offered to trigger reflection on some important issues that this book usefully raises. The McGeeney approach is relevant to mental health and outdoor practitioners, offering an accessible and flexible way of doing ecotherapy. Chapter 3 clearly conveys this accessibility and is a useful chapter overall, with chapters 4 to 7 delivering helpful evidence that supports the benefits of nature exposure and nature connection. The book also provides a great number of activities that can be implemented flexibly, which is not so for other ecotherapy approaches being advertised currently, such as Charlton Hall's (2016) "Facilitator Manual for Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy" that advocates a strict 12 session programme. Also, if one puts aside ecotherapy's complexity and diversity common to many health and wellbeing approaches, then this is a book that will help many get started in 'doing' ecotherapy and spread the abundant benefits of working in this way to various people. I will certainly be using and adapting some of the activities in my work!

Hall, C. B. (2016) Facilitator Manual for Mindfulness-Based Ecotherapy. CreateSpace
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