
Indeed, it was a paradise.

Ecosystemic intelligence: towards the education of feeling

by Joanna Bojczewska



Ecosystemic intelligence

Learning food-growing can be a deeply transformational practice for the planet and individual consciousness and this project suggests that to learn about nature is first to feel – to look, hear and feel beyond our individual selves.

In modern times, humans became largely atomised, separated from their bio-physical continuity with nature and with communities. We live as if we were independent from the environments on which we fundamentally rely for life our processes (water, air, soil, plant kingdom etc.).

Even ecology as a discipline is largely abstracted and its knowledge reproduced in isolation from the original bio-material context that inspired its formulation in the first place. The scientific lense of objectivist ecology hands to us representations of exotic natural phenomena in razor-sharp taxonomies, but neglects the embodied skills of intuitive reading of our immediate ecological locality: the soils, the birds or flora, the weather, water and landscape. The ecological *genius loci* of here and now.

Ecosystemic intelligence (also known as ecological intelligence, or ecological literacy) is a concept of the type of modern ecological wisdom that is urgently needed to be restored. *Intelligence* [...] is generally defined as “*the bio-psychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture*” (Gardner, H.). Information - that is in all its variety, not only concepts.

The core problems faced by today’s global community are the disastrous ongoing consequences of climate change and environmental degradation. We need ways to harness our deep-seated potential to solve these problems, intelligently.

To point to *ecosystemic intelligence* can help us address the stark apathy of vast majority of people, in facing the imperceptible depletion of natural resources. We need to create ecologically-informed education and ethics that will inspire and re-direct our human collective to act on behalf of the whole web of life and its wellbeing. Not against it.



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Ecological knowing as *feeling*

Ecosystemic intelligence, subverts the “I think, therefore I am” into “I am, therefore there is thinking” because it acknowledges that humans are not just ‘thinking-heads’, and nature is not “a vast supply-depot”. In fact, *ecosystemic intelligence*, offers an even more radical post-cartesian refinement: “There is ecosystem, therefore there I am, and therefore there is thinking”.

“Human beings, uniquely among animals, live a two-tier existence, half-in nature and half-out, both as organisms with bodies and as persons with minds”, wrote anthropologist Tim Ingold, studying the perceptions of the environment in hunter-gathering societies.

The modern education, he concluded, constructs a biased view of a learner: it validates “the person with mind” and rewards thinking skills over the less tangible, learning processes done by “the organism with body” and “the body in the environment” which are rooted in *feeling*. Masanobu Fukuoka, pioneer of natural farming, echoed the risk of this split: “the more involved people become with the activity of the intellect, the more they set themselves apart and the more difficult it becomes to live naturally,” he warned.

Knowing as feeling supports a much wider ‘field-view’ processing and gathering of information. Indeed, feeling can hold within its process the more particularising, analytic cognitive functions of the rational mind.

Feeling as a way of knowing relies significantly on the ability to rest and relax in the body and to extend our awareness in a receptive, non-labelling, and yet deeply insightful manner into various fields of sense-perception. *Feeling* does not finish on human skin. *Feeling* can go infinitely inwards and boundlessly outwards, in and out of our bodies. *Feeling* is interdependent and “nested” within the body-in-the-environment mutuality.

This is well-captured by a meditation teacher, Adyashanti, who says: “The body is the sensing instrument of consciousness. Without the body and the mind, the trees couldn’t see themselves. Usually we think that we are looking at a tree, but the tree is looking at itself through us”. We need to be open enough, to let the ecosystem emerge and see itself through us.



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Learning food growing

Today. Who has grown your food, the one you ate and the one you will eat? And the one tomorrow? And day after? Could you grow or harvest your own food in your most immediate local conditions? Do you know at the people *who could*? Do you know the impact of not-knowing - on yourself, on others, on nature?

When we grow food, we grow our ecosystemic intelligence, and we start knowing the answers to these questions. Gardening can stimulate a profound shift in our daily wellbeing, worldviews, and systemic policies. Gardening can lead to personal growth and may inspire societal transition towards regenerative growth paradigms.

We may ask, what type of intelligence enabled men to survive in the natural environment for hundreds of thousands of years without supermarkets? Before there came the tillage, and the tractor, the trans-national food trade? Food is a universal, fundamental need and human right, of every person. The degree of mass alienation that the world currently reproduces in society's relation to food is, however, dramatic.

Learning about food ecosystem requires practical involvement – an immersion, a part-taking, a surrender – your whole skin in the game. Becoming at once 'more than yourself,' by expanding interdependent embrace; and humbly 'less than yourself', by re-embedding yourself as small part of the vast whole.

Permaculture education can support new-comers to gardening in developing intuitive feeling of complex food-growing cycles and ecosystems, by including practices of "Ecosystemic intelligence". "The ultimate goal of gardening", after all, "is not the cultivation of crops, but the cultivation and the perfection of human beings" – pointed Masanobu Fukuoka.

Permaculture already attunes and sensitises learners in different modalities of knowing and feeling with its practical 'in the field' observation and design methodologies. It broadens the horizon of caring feeling through the ethical triad of Earth care, People care and Fair shares. It is perfectly aligned to be an ecosystemic educational template.



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but the cultivation and the perfection of human beings" - Masanobu Fukuoka*

Towards the education of *feeling*

Ecosystemic intelligence is not measurable like IQ. Ecosystems are too complex, too dynamic, too multi-dimensional. *Ecosystemic intelligence* is a knowing that grows through education of *feeling*, along with, but not alone by, the development of systems thinking.

Through the *education feeling*, we can integrate the range and patterns of information flow beyond what we already know in language-concepts. This opens intuition, refines and attunes sensory registers to the yet unknown. It enables communication with non-human others and fosters respectful mutuality in webs of life.

The education of feeling is proposed here through the lense of 3 modalities of cognition. In all three, *feeling* means relaxing into a dimension or a field of being.

In "*I*" modalities of feeling (aspects: senses, multiperspectivalism, animism) one relaxes into specific sense gateways and sensory fields. From animistic perspective, "*I*" also means trying on different 'perceptual' perspectives of other beings, discovering their needs and qualities.

In "*We*" modalities of feeling (aspects: trust, intimacy, interdependence) the learner relaxes into the sense of connectivity and inter-being with other forms of life around oneself; engages the dynamic pulsating between individual and unified being.

In "*Field*" modalities of feeling (aspects: belonging, wholeness, beauty), one practices the dissolution of individual boundary through the emphasis on field-aspect, such as surrender to the gravity, merging into a sense of beauty or into the expanse of the sky. Examples of practices to cultivate ecosystemic intelligence and awareness include:

1. Look, hear, feel. Meditation instruction by Shinzen Young.
2. Inter-breathing exercise in "After Becoming and Animal"
3. Earth-descent meditation by Reggie Ray
4. Expansiveness practice of Sky-gazing from within Dzogchen tradition
5. Cultivating "perceiving perceiving" animistic view, from Integral Ecology book



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Paradigm shift

“If people come to realise,” wrote Gary Snyder, “that there are many non-material, non-destructive paths of growth of the highest and most fascinated order it would help dampen the common fear, that the steady state economy would mean deadly stagnation.”

The current system will sustain itself until it literally “eats the branch from which it grows”. Are we aware of that? We are all witnesses to the devastation done by the economic model treating vast number of living forms as mere commodities, if not plain raw material for anonymous industrial processing and international shipping. Are we able to *fully* Look, Hear and Feel in the midst of inter-secting crises?

We have critically crossed multiple planetary boundaries resulting in intersecting crises that will only deepen, unless we redefine radically our orientation to growth. And not only. We need to re-awaken the sense of reverence and sacred stewardship for Mother Earth, if we are to see her breathing, living and abundant in 20 or 30 years.

Practical strategies developed by permaculture and agroecology with sustainable food-growing at their heart, revitalise self-organised communities, reorient centralised economies towards human scale, and raise ecological intelligence of individuals and communities. They aim to restore direct relations of caring interdependence with the land.

Our fundamental needs, such as food-growing, when fulfilled in hundreds of thousands of places at once, consciously, sensitively, can unleash a mass, distributed, ecological transformation. The accumulation of everyday tiny acts can expand our consciousness and restore our commons. Soil, water, air, our bodies and our land. Perhaps it will take some learning to do less, than do more. But we have no time to waste. We need to Look, Hear and Feel, anew and afresh. We need to scale down and slow waaay down.

“Indeed, it can be a paradise again” – it all depends on us.



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