Many of you who are regular readers know I am happiest outdoors, amid nature. And, many of you know I speak of our Pontiac region as possessing world-class, spectacular, and accessible biodiversity.

To me, nature is not only beautiful to look at. Nature is also a place many of us seek when we want to refresh ourselves. Who amongst us hasn’t gone outside for a walk, horseback ride, ski or paddle when we have felt depressed or troubled?

Truly, there’s something about being outside that lifts the spirits — enabling us to rejuvenate our spiritual well-being and mental health through recreational activities. Is it simply a coincidence that nature has this effect upon us?

Certainly starting in the late 1700s English romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge as well as philosopher John Ruskin understood and wrote about Nature’s healing ways. And, looking way back into human history, Chinese Taoists understood that gardening was beneficial to health.

Nowadays, we have new terms describing our connection with nature: ecopsychology and ecotherapy.

**What is ecopsychology?**

Wikipedia the online encyclopedia tells us, “Ecopsychology studies the relationship between human beings and the natural world through ecological and psychological principles. The field seeks to develop and understand ways of expanding the emotional connection between individuals and the natural world, thereby assisting individuals with developing sustainable lifestyles and remediating alienation from nature. Theodore Roszak is credited with coining the term in his 1992 book, The Voice of the Earth. He later expanded the idea in the 1995 anthology Ecopsychology with co-editors Mary Gomes and Allen Kanner.”

**What is ecotherapy?**

I recently spent time with Pontiac’s very own Dr. Wendy Ryan, Director of Luskville’s Waterfront Wellness Centre. She introduced me to the concept of ecotherapy via a spring hike on her beautiful 56-acre property which includes two small lakes.

Dr. Ryan explained that ecotherapy has been defined as “the use of interventions aimed at improving mental health within the context of the natural environment and through the use of green spaces. Therefore, ecotherapy allows counsellors and psychologists to practice “outside of the box,” moving away from a clinical office environment and back into nature. Dr. Ryan pointed me to some scientific studies showing that “green exercise” such as a walk in the woods or canoeing/kayaking can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, plus increase self esteem.

On a short hike with Dr. Ryan we were able to see more than a dozen painted turtles basking in the mid-morning sun. We also observed “boiling water” lakeside (turbulence created by hundreds of tadpoles soaking up the sun’s heat in shallow water). Marveling at such natural phenomena or simply listening to the sounds of nature on a walk in the woods can have a healing effect on the mind, body, and soul.

Dr. Ryan is a Certified Canadian Counsellor and a Member of the National Association of Naturopaths. She offers ecotherapy activities such as canoeing and kayaking on the Ottawa River and walks in the woods. Moreover, these services are covered by most extended health insurance plans. For more information, visit Dr. Ryan’s website (www.waterfrontwellness.ca) and her Facebook page at: www.facebook.com/waterfrontwellness.

**Our essential connection**

Both ecopsychology and ecotherapy speak to our human connection with the natural world. Originally, human beings had a direct relationship with nature. As hunter-gatherers we depended upon our understanding of and connection to nature for basic survival.

Today, many people are almost completely removed from nature. Throughout the world, increasing numbers of human beings cocoon in their dwellings. More and more choose to communicate by Internet, cellphone, iPad, iPhones — you name the technology — rather than getting outside in nature or even communicating face-to-face with other human beings. And, as our gap from physical activity and being in nature increases, our personal and interpersonal stress increases.

Somehow, many people no longer recognize that exercise and actually, just being in nature provides therapeutic and restorative comfort, offering balance in our lives.

Indeed, this disconnection to our natural environment — particularly as experienced by children — is an increasing cause for concern among many of us. (For a good discussion of what’s called nature-deficit disorder read Richard Louv’s insightful book, Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from naturedeficit disorder.)

**Pontiac-based eco-therapy**

Happily, here in Pontiac, natural beauty surrounds us by way of our forests, fields, lakes, rivers and wetlands. Truly, we are blessed.

For years I’ve written about how the Pontiac would be a haven for spas, retreats, and outdoorsy activities and I’m happy to say in the 23 years I’ve lived here, many initiatives have sprung up in the wellness and tourism sectors. Take a look at and be proud of such businesses as HorizonX, Esprit, Timberland Tours, Camping Base Macorcarpa, That Canadian Lodge, and Waterfront Wellness — just a handful of many top-notch initiatives.

And check out Pontiac’s registered massage therapists and chiropractor clinic. Truly, in combination with our excellent medical centres and the hospital, Pontiac is increasingly becoming a recognized wellness destination. I’m proud to say my world includes nature and the daily ecotherapy I receive from being active, outdoors. How about you?

Want to “get into nature” this summer? Step outside ... Or, for an ecotherapy kickstart, give Dr. Ryan a call at Waterfront Wellness.

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Ecopsychology is one of the branches of ecology. The word "psycho-" means "related to soul," "spiritual." The main and the most significant for us Souls are the Creator and the Representatives of Him. So, relationships with God, which include, first of all, the Path of spiritual development, represent the main priority line of ecopsychology. Ecopsychology.