

What is Developmental Ecopsychology?

A developmental framework for understanding how human lives continue to form through relationship with ecological environments across time.

Kathleen Donchak, PhD

Last updated: March 2026

Definition

Developmental ecopsychology explores how human lives continue to form through relationship with place, experience, and reflection across time. It recognizes that periods of change can disrupt the orientation that once organized a life, and that sustained attention to experience allows patterns of growth, loss, and renewal to become visible. Rather than focusing on pathology or treatment, developmental ecopsychology attends to the ecological and reflective conditions that help people remain oriented within the ongoing development of their lives.

Gardens, landscapes, and recurring places in nature often become environments where these patterns of development can be observed across seasons and over time.

A Non-Clinical Orientation

Developmental ecopsychology belongs to the broader field of applied ecopsychology but focuses specifically on non-clinical contexts of human development. Gardens, landscapes, and recurring places in nature often become environments where people observe their lives unfolding across time. In these environments, individuals encounter cycles of change that mirror their own developmental processes and support reflection, reorientation, and meaning-making.

Developmental ecopsychology provides a developmental lens for understanding how many forms of applied ecopsychology practice support human growth across the lifespan.

Many practitioners in applied ecopsychology create environments where people experience connection with the natural world. These practitioners include garden educators, ecoart therapists and facilitators, outdoor guides, environmental writers and editors, educators, and facilitators of reflective writing.

One example within this broader practitioner community is Applied Eco-Arts, developed by Patricia Patterson, PhD. Applied Eco-Arts integrates art therapy, applied ecopsychology, and environmental arts practice to cultivate reciprocal relationship between human beings and the living Earth.

Through creative inquiry, sensory observation, and place-based participation, practitioners working in these fields create environments where ecological experience supports reflection, relationship, and human development.

Core Principles

1. Human development unfolds through relationship with place

Human lives continue to form through ongoing relationship with the environments people inhabit across time. Gardens, landscapes, and recurring places in nature provide settings where attention, care, and participation reveal patterns of growth, change, and continuity. Development is therefore not only an internal psychological process. It is ecological and relational.

2. Development becomes visible through sustained attention to experience

Periods of change can disrupt the orientation that once organized a life. When people return regularly to environments that allow attention to settle, reflection makes patterns visible that might otherwise remain unnoticed. Writing, observation, and other reflective practices help individuals recognize how their lives continue to develop. Reflection does not create development, but it helps people perceive it.

3. Ecological environments support non-clinical developmental processes

Many forms of human development occur outside clinical or therapeutic contexts. Environments such as gardens, landscapes, and shared places in nature provide conditions that support reflection, reorientation, and meaning-making without requiring treatment or intervention. Developmental ecopsychology attends to the ecological conditions that help people remain oriented within the ongoing development of their lives.

Scope of Developmental Ecopsychology

Developmental ecopsychology focuses on several related areas of inquiry:

- how human development unfolds through ongoing relationship with ecological environments
- how periods of transition disrupt and reorganize a person's orientation to life
- how reflective practices such as journaling, observation, and creative expression reveal patterns of development across time
- how environments such as gardens, landscapes, and recurring places in nature support non-clinical processes of growth, meaning-making, and renewal

This articulation of developmental ecopsychology reflects ongoing observation, writing, and dialogue with practitioners working in applied ecopsychology and related fields. The language of the field continues to evolve through practice.

Suggested citation

Donchak, K. (2026). What is Developmental Ecopsychology? Retrieved from <https://kathleendonchak.com>

Contact: kathleen@kathleendonchak.com | kathleendonchak.com