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Ecological Intelligence: Rediscovering Ourselves in Nature *by Ian McCallum*

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BOOK REVIEW

Ecological Intelligence: Rediscovering Ourselves in Nature. 2008. Ian McCallum. Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, Colorado. 239 pages; \$16.95, paper. ISBN-13: 978-1-55591-687-9.

Ian McCallum's book *Ecological Intelligence* is a witness to one of today's major issues: the basic disconnect between the human population and the natural environment. McCallum attempts to explain how this disconnect occurred and presents his personal vision on how this disconnect needs to be bridged. He realizes, however, that construction of this bridge will be difficult and will require the collective conscious of everyone from all walks of life.

The book is divided into 2 parts. Part one, divided into 6 chapters, is entitled "Remembering Where We Have Come From" and provides the foundation and history behind McCallum's philosophy, detailing some of his personal experiences and quoting some of our greatest thinkers and a variety of poems. Part two, divided into 4 chapters, is entitled "Looking Ahead" and identifies the various roadblocks and barriers that keep people from reconnecting with nature, while making it clear that we are the "keepers of the zoo" and are responsible for our actions. Everyone and everything is connected somehow.

People today tend to live in a vacuum; we are only concerned with "now" and are not concerned about how our actions affect others and the environment in the future (p. 69). We have forgotten our past. McCallum uses the thorns of the wag-'n-bietjie tree, *Ziziphus mucronata*, as a symbol of this past-to-future connection. The thorns are paired with one pointing backward and the other forward. An Nguni African legend uses these paired thorns to remind ourselves to not only look ahead into the future, but to also remember where we came from.

McCallum uses a variety of these paired concepts throughout the book. In addition to the paired thorns, he often uses the yes-no pair, challenging the reader to answer *yes* or *no* to a variety of tough questions. The yes-no pair is also used to show that every idea and interpretation has at least 2 sides. *Yes* and *no* are very powerful words and we can use them to decide

what to do about our future. He also uses the nature-human pair when discussing the disconnect between people and wild environments. This pair is particularly important when McCallum discusses the kinship between ourselves, wild places, and wild animals (p. 173). We have a deep genetic connection with all living things and McCallum argues that this connection is key to our ecological intelligence.

McCallum pushes the reader to go beyond science. He ventures into the metaphysical realm at times and explains that we, as a species, are superstitious even when we try not to be (p. 137). He argues that symbol formation and pattern making are part of our survival. Sometimes we only understand something when we make a deep, emotional connection with it. For example, both Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace arrived at their idea of biological evolution during an intuitive "flash" (p. 136).

Ultimately, the bridging of the gap between nature and humans needs to happen soon. The human population is doubling in a shorter amount of time. One billion people existed around the year 1800. The second billion was achieved in about 130 years. Thirty years later, the third billion arrived, and the fourth billion occurred 15 years later. Astonishingly, 10 billion people could exist by 2050 (p. 218). With that many people not understanding where we came from and taking an astronomical amount of resources from the earth, disaster is imminent. McCallum cites zoologist Jonathan Kingdon as saying the following: "We must remake ourselves in some fashion that retains and develops the countless benefits of technology and culture, yet does not cut us off from or destroy all the physical processes that created us as animals" (p. 219). I believe this quote is the most powerful in the entire book. It is the crux of what the human population must do to survive into the next century.

The book is not necessarily an easy read. It is probable that I missed portions of the message that McCallum is trying to communicate in his writings. If McCallum reads my review of his book, he will likely agree. I recommend that the reader read it a few times, take copious notes,

highlight important passages, dog-ear pages, and think hard about the message. McCallum's main point is that our ecological intelligence is lacking and that rediscovering ourselves in nature is not going to be easy; we have unfortunately distanced ourselves from our wild past, and it will take something more than McCallum's vision to put us back on track. Poignant are McCallum's questions on pages 223–224: "Does the image of the ziziphus speak to you? Do the poets and those ancient admonitions of Apollo –

to know thyself, to do no thing in excess, and to honor the gods – make sense? Is an ecological intelligence possible? If so, then say *yes*, quickly. This could be the last watch and there are things to do."

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