

# Back to nature

When everyday life gets overwhelming, tapping into the power of the wilderness through ecotherapy, or a journey through an untamed landscape, offers us the chance to rebalance our lives and get in touch with what really matters **BY LORNA V**

**B**ob Dylan called it 'the wild unknown... where I could not go wrong'; that expanse of new territory stretching out before us as we encounter a place we've never been before. For a while, it felt like everyone was discussing *Eat Pray Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert's travelogue about finding oneself and, ultimately, romance. Then something happened. Instead of getting excited about trips that chartered romantic flights, readers have begun turning to chronicles of life-changing journeys into the natural world. This year has seen the success of former heroin addict Cheryl Strayed's memoir *Wild* (Atlantic, £12.99), the tale of a 1,100-mile trek along the Pacific Crest Trail, with Reese Witherspoon optioning the book for the big screen. Writers like Kathleen Jamie, Robert Macfarlane and Rebecca Solnit are bringing back fascinating reports on nature, history and changes in human habitation about less visited places, or simply finding elements of the wild in cities. What they all have in common is a sense of the importance of the natural world to humans.

The psychology world's latest buzzwords tap into this sense of the link between us and nature. Ecopsychology is based on the premise that connecting to the ecosystem is good for us. According to 'ecotherapy', our disconnection from the natural world is making us feel anxious, empty or dissatisfied with life.

'The recession has made many people realise we've got ourselves into a "having" mode,' says Paul Maiteny, one of a new breed of

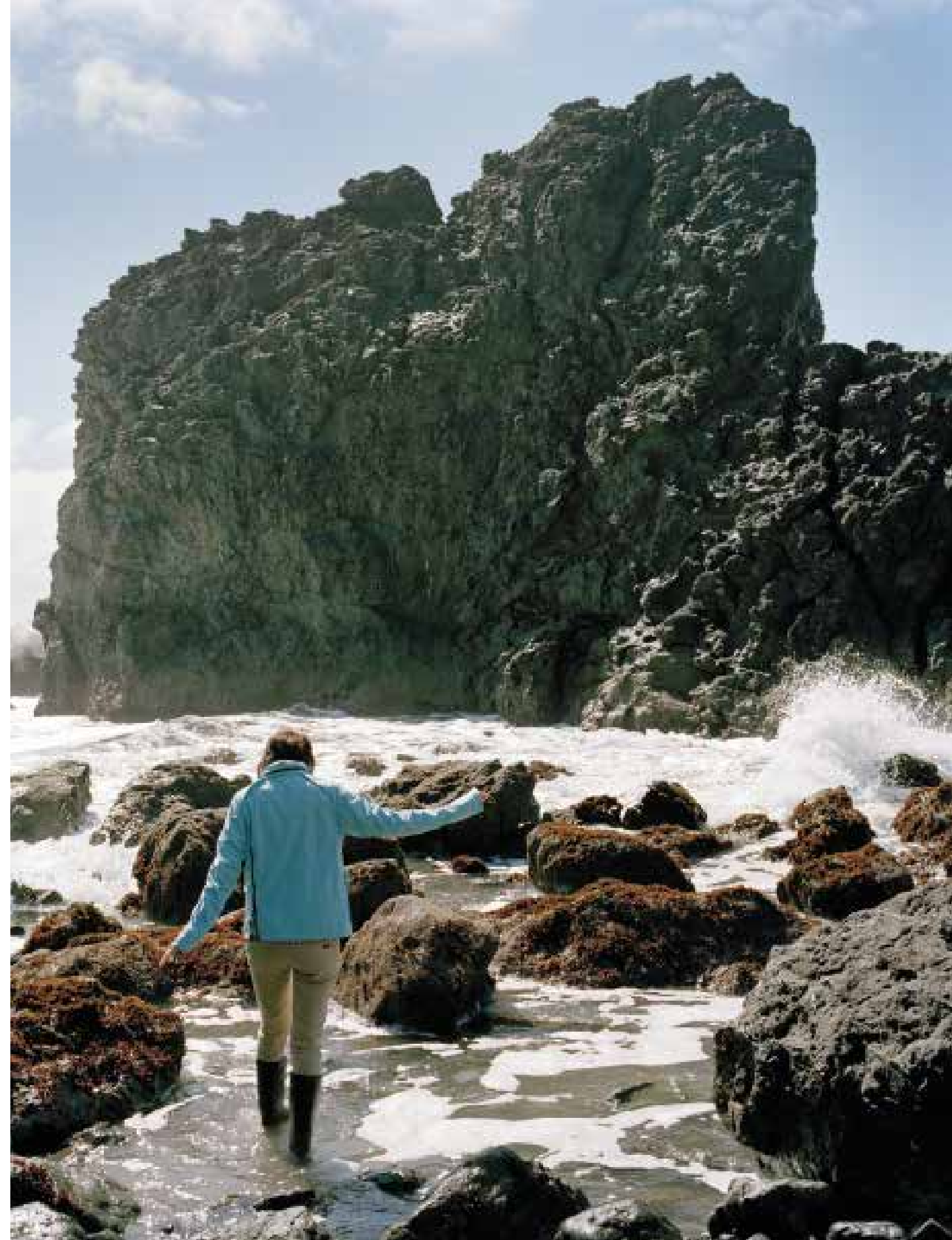
psychotherapists who are also ecologists. 'We are realising that for thousands of years, the deeper spiritual traditions were about having less and doing less.' Maiteny's studies for London South Bank University tackle the reasons for what he calls the 'inner ecological breakdown' caused by our lack of engagement with something larger than ourselves – the natural world.

The wilder we get, the more we can learn. So why is nature potentially our most powerful personal teacher? 'Human nature is part of nature: it's the place of our deepest belonging,' Jay Griffiths, author of *Wild: An Elemental Journey* (Penguin, £9.99), explains. 'The feeling of belonging is essential to wellbeing. The natural world gives the psyche the feeling of being unjudged, of being accepted. Nature turns us outward. We can lose ourselves, become transparent and less trammelled by aspects of the individual life.'

Wilderness therapy was created to be nurturing from within a supportive framework. In the US, wilderness educator Keith Russell argues that it reflects traditional rites of passage in indigenous cultures across the world, with solo periods spent alone in the wild to reflect.

'It's not just people running wild in the hills,' the UK's Wilderness Foundation's psychotherapist and trainer Hayley Marshall is keen to point out. 'Taking its root from the anthropological idea of leaving behind your tribe and engaging with the environment, a trip involves a severance period, leaving what you know and preparing to go, then a >>>

«The natural world gives the psyche a feeling of being utterly unjudged»



PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID FENTON/GALLERY STOCK

>>> threshold time between old and new, then the return.'

Science backs up the positive effects of nature with environmental psychology studies showing a neural effect on the brain. One seminal study in 2008 by the University of Washington, reported in *The Journal of Environmental Psychology*, compared responses to real and digital images of nature, with the real thing producing lower, more relaxed, heart rates.

The mental benefits have been explored by the University of Essex, working closely with the Wilderness Foundation, and it's the trip, rather than being in nature *per se*, that's key. 'The crucial difference between this and simply going to the park is that it's about embarking on a journey to a wild place – which is also a journey to one's own wild interior,' says Marshall.

A typical trip starts with a night in a remote cottage where a guide, a facilitator and a therapist will welcome a group which has been fully assessed and prepared for the experience. The group then goes out into the wild for a few days together.

Richard Corby, operations manager at the Wilderness Foundation, says it's not unusual to be anxious or apprehensive. 'Being in nature is a culture shock and can be upsetting; even environmentalists find it a huge challenge. It may be unsettling not to be able to rely on technology, or have cigarettes or alcohol,' he says. 'It's a transforming experience. On days three to four, things you thought were important or were holding you back, suddenly aren't that important. Quite quickly, who you are and what you do doesn't matter. Cultural divides disappear in the wilderness.'

Many people are drawn to these trips at pivotal times in their lives, often when someone close to them has died. Corby himself describes how, in 2010, on a leadership programme for students, he found himself processing his own grief over his mother's death. 'I hadn't been able to do this until I had some solo time on that trip. I remember the moment well; sitting on the side of a mountain and a fly landed on my hand. I got back and shared my feelings and everyone was supportive. Being out in the wild can remove blockages. On top of a mountain, the pressure is off. It's just you and nature. You have all this cognitive congestion in daily life and don't know how to process it.'

«Who you are and what you do doesn't matter. Cultural divides disappear in the wilderness»

Corby explains that the effect of longer trips is longer-lasting, with studies showing a 'wilderness effect' if you engage in an immersive experience for five days or longer. 'There'll be a peak on the journey, and you feel fantastic as soon as you get back, and, though it tapers off, it continues for a few months.'

Whether journeying solo, as part of a group, or within a therapy framework, after five days in the wilderness, the mind shifts to a different emotional space. 'People often report being calmer,' says Marshall. 'They reach a more meditative state and become

more reflective. People also tend to make big life decisions.'

You don't necessarily have to be going through a traumatic life event, such as bereavement, a divorce or redundancy, to benefit from wilderness therapy. 'You can go on a journey just to be with yourself and see what emerges,' says Marshall. 'For some people, it might be an old loss that they've not thought about; reflecting on

certain relationships is common; and people start to think "I need more of this in my life".

For those unable, or not ready, to undertake a long journey, Maiteny recommends looking for wilderness in our daily lives. 'A city is no less part of an eco-system than the moors or the ocean. Look for a flower growing out of bricks or the birds on a building site.' ■

## EXPLORE MORE

■ *Holloway* by Robert Macfarlane, Dan Richards and Stanley Donwood (Faber, £14.99) documents a journey by these nature writers and artists into South Dorset's sandstone region and its spectacular woodland holloways.

■ *I Know Where I'm Going* is a classic British film from 1945 set on the fictitious Isle of Kiloran. Watch it for inspiring outdoor scenery and fascinating symbolism.

■ *Wild: A Journey from Lost to Found* by Cheryl Strayed (Atlantic, £12.99) is an account of a woman's journey out of her old life and into a new understanding of her self via a very long walk across America.

■ *The Wilderness Foundation* ([wildernessfoundation.org.uk](http://wildernessfoundation.org.uk)) provides therapy programmes and is dedicated to preserving the world's wild places by highlighting their positive impact on the health of individuals, society and the planet.

■ Resources relating to the practice of ecopsychology can be found at [ecopsychology.org.uk](http://ecopsychology.org.uk).

## “Gathering from the wild is central to who I am as a person”

Liz Knight, 37, from Walterstone, Herefordshire, is a professional forager

Foraging has always been part of my life; as a child I was constantly picking apples and blackberries, or flowers for potions, or searching for fallen branches to make dens. Gathering from the wild was my child's play and it remains central to who I am as a person. I'm convinced that turning unconsciously to nature from a young age grounded me in the world and gave me an outlook that has helped me through the heartbreak, illness and loss that life bestows on all of us.

Most of my foraging happens in the evening, these days. By the time my children are fed, bathed and asleep I'm like a coiled spring, and as soon as the evenings are light enough, I grab a bag and head off down the hill and I gather. Whether I'm in the garden for 10 minutes or in the nearby fields until the stars are out, I find that there is nothing more soothing, relaxing and mindful for me to do.

It's not about the food and eating at this point; it's all about the moment – the drone of bees gathering the same nectar as I am, the evening song of the thrush, or the Canada geese gliding overhead. It's about allowing that child who is still residing in me to come out and get face-to-face again with branches that would make a good pole for a den or perfect flowers for fairy hats; the beauty of the world around me reminding me that my life is a wonderful gift.

Liz Knight is founder of [foragefinefoods.co.uk](http://foragefinefoods.co.uk)