

News from the IAEH

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REFLEXIVE EVOLUTION OF THE ECOHEALTH PARADIGM: A POSSIBLE YIN-YANG DESIGN

Yin-Yang is a concept that denotes balance and harmony. This Chinese philosophy recognizes that opposite forces can actually complement each other. One side of the classic Yin-Yang symbol is a mirror image of the other and together they denote a unity of opposites; a dark circle within a white background and a white circle within a dark background. The desire of Ecohealth practitioners to contribute to future Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) may best be represented by a similar balance in the consideration of human health and the environment. Based upon research emerging from the Kunming Conference, a symmetry between the *ecosystem approach to health* and the *health approach to ecosystem* may best meet the desires and challenges of current and future Ecohealth advocates. For those new to what is sometimes called, the *Ecohealth lens*, the *ecosystem approach to health* has evolved as a tagline for Ecohealth, with emphasis on considering the ecological contributions to human health. The suggestion herein is that emphasis be placed on the balanced inclusion of the *health approach to ecosystem*, an ecocentric consideration. Ecosystem capacity could thus be considered and integrated with health for issues such as environmental sustainability and food security; central to future SDGs. Current research on the perspectives of early-careerists in Ecohealth revealed interesting related perspectives. The assessed culture of these researchers elucidated a profes-

sional desire for direct impact on climate change; an emerging challenge for ecocentric consideration, pivotal to the future of the planet.

LOOKING BACK AT THE KUNMING 2012 ECOHEALTH CONFERENCE

Our Association's biennial conference process was elevated by our efforts focused upon Kunming, China; attracting an unprecedented range of presentations that included both anthropocentric and ecocentric topics. The conference location also provided an opportunity to draw upon China's cultural heritage, and share insights on one of the most significant countries in the world, in terms of future global impact. In addition and for the first time, the Ecohealth Association sponsored the development of a conference statement, projecting the possibility of an enhanced future role on SDGs. One Ecohealth Association board member dedicated his conference attendance to coordination of inputs on the drafting of this *Ecohealth Statement*, with attendees from 60 countries encouraged to self-nominate for the process. The final *Statement* version that emerged from the Ecohealth Association Board, projected Ecohealth for meeting SDGs through a "human-centred ecosystems" approach.

The conference also provided an inter-continental platform on which to consider (programmatic) *images of the future* that might best respond to the global challenges along the nexus of human health and the environment (*the nexus*). Building upon the Association's dedication to incorporate early-careerist perspectives, the Kunming setting offered a unique opportunity to examine the culture of professionalism for Chinese early-careerists, projected against the challenges of the country and international

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counterparts. The perspective of these *Chinese Kunming Attendees* (CKA) was assessed and subsequently compared to the *Ecohealth Student Section* (ESS) members, through the use of cultural consensus theory. A five point *Likert scale* was used to identify consensus on questions with possible responses ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The results, detailed in the online supporting material provided insight on the vision of the future by young careerists associated with Ecohealth, as well as inputs on how future Ecohealth programs could respond to the challenges along *the nexus*.

COMPARING CHINESE EARLY-CAREERISTS WITH AN INTERNATIONAL COUNTERPART

The basis and potential for collaboration between China and the international Ecohealth community were highlighted by both surveyed groups strongly agreeing that they plan to influence policy with their work. Similarly, all young careerists strongly agreed that activism is important for improving wellbeing and ecosystem health. The early-careerists from China were unique in their strong agreement regarding an element of self-sacrifice being important to contribute to sustainability, and; that their careers will focus this self-sacrifice as a part of translating research into action. Perhaps not surprisingly, the ESS group demonstrated consensus on continuing a strong personal linkage to the ecohealth approach, as well as the future inclusion of indigenous knowledge and the need for fundamental global changes to economic, compensational and motivational paradigms. The results demonstrate and highlight potential topics and tools available for creating cross-cultural consensus and initiatives. These results also demonstrate great promise in terms of international collaboration with China. Primary interpretations emerging from the analysis are presented below as insights on the future of Ecohealth.

Both groups of early-careerists had a focus on influencing policy, mitigating climate change, activism and working within the system. Public relations and conditions on funding were also considered important components in Ecohealth expansion, and Ecohealth was seen as central to sustainable development, with environmental-mental health linkages highlighted. The CKA group expressed uncertainty regarding whether Ecohealth in practice today encompasses the *ecosystem approach to health*, perhaps in part due to the fledgling environmental movement in

China, now catalysed by low international environmental ratings. Both groups were uncertain of Ecohealth's current function regarding the health approach to ecology. The CKA respondents identified with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), while only the ESS felt the Kunming Statement represented their perspective. Both groups identified the importance of activism and the ESS thought it important in their careers. CKA were focused on putting research into action and personal sacrifice, while ESS expressed interest in advancing Ecohealth. The CKA group was attuned to gender equity needs, education development and expressed belief that environmental-health systems are in place, with only adjustments required. The ESS group supported a top-down approach, was strongly in support of Ecohealth, called for further engagement on indigenous knowledge and strongly believed that fundamental global changes are needed in areas of socio-economics and education.

ECOHEALTH PRIORITIES AS AN IMAGE OF THE FUTURE

Subsequently, results contributed to the drafting of templates for priority programming along *the nexus* for the Philippines, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Canada and a more in-depth consideration of China's cultural ecology. In each country, it was concluded that the priority template involved both *the ecosystem approach to health* and equally or with more emphasis, *the health approach to ecosystem* in which the ecosystem is the focus, but it is viewed through a health lens. As outlined in the supporting material, environmental sustainability and food security were two cross cutting themes within the *health approach to ecosystem*. The primary conclusion was that the future of Ecohealth as an emerging meta-discipline, principle-centred upon contributing to SDGs, could perhaps best be optimized through an expansion of the existing paradigm. Ecohealth has become somewhat synonymous with *the ecosystem approach to health*. The current efforts to assess priorities along *the nexus*, elucidated strong support for an additional focus on *the health approach to ecosystem*; thus incorporating eco-centric considerations beyond the concept of human-centred ecosystems and potentially including food security challenges based upon ecological capacity, as well as other forms of environmental sustainability. Borrowing from the Chinese culture, we see these two approaches as potentially in balance, through a *Yin-Yang design*; in essence a *unity of*

opposites for Ecohealth—a focus on health through an ecosystem lens and a focus on ecosystem through a health lens; in effect each complementing the other. The national program considerations demonstrated that there is a need for programmatic approaches to collaboration involving these two lines of action—effectively evolving the Ecohealth paradigm in a reflexive manner, in direct response to challenges along *the nexus* and as a strategy to maximize the contribution to SDGs.

The nexus of human health and the environment is becoming increasingly problematic as a result of currently uncontrolled factors that include population growth and climate change. It has become globally acknowledged that further development of an ecocentric worldview may be critical for humans to survive on planet earth; as exemplified by climate change. As the Ecohealth leaders of today are replaced by the next generation, continuity in an evolving field can potentially be optimized and focused by including the perspective of early-careerists. The early-careerists projection of their professional careers is in part, a projection of the Ecohealth *image of the future*. Further, these inter-generational considerations may well be critical for maximizing the efficacy of transforming the Ecohealth paradigm to more successfully meet SDGs. Ecohealth, as an association might best support the restructuring of global economies suggested by ESS through consideration of how to balance the two tenets outlined above for the environment and human-health nexus. Globally, national environmental budgets are generally a small fraction of that for human health. Ecohealth as an emerging meta-discipline could be in a significant position to facilitate the future balancing of these budgets and paradigms to best encompass SDGs in a collaborative manner. Indeed embracing this approach may well attract further budgetary consideration for both tenets.

We suggest that excellence through the *ecosystem approach to health* may not in itself lead to stronger Ecohealth programs focused on SDGs. The significant desire of early-careerists to focus on climate change challenges through their professional activities demonstrates a projection of an Ecohealth meta-discipline that includes ecocentrism, or; from a Chinese/Confucian perspective, the anthropocosmic vision as put forth by *Tu Weiming*. The perspectives of the surveyed early-careerists were in line with the national assessments regarding priority programs and further suggest that Ecohealth today does not incorporate well, a *health approach to ecosystem*. Borrowing from the Chinese culture, these phrases combined perhaps represent the *Yin-*

Yang of a holistic Ecohealth response to SDGs. We consider this could best be manifested by projecting priority national Ecohealth programs and the next generation of the paradigm to move more significantly towards SDGs. It is, however, considered critical to maintain and build upon the established leadership through the *ecosystem approach to health*.

ECOHEALTH ALONG THE NEXUS OF HUMAN HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Further, in our opinion, realizing the goal of broad Ecohealth contributions to SDGs will require some form of inclusion or enhancement of the *health approach to ecosystem*. We also project that the *health approach to ecosystem* is in itself important for transcending and healing the results from the historic global focus on human-centred ecosystems. Based upon the determination of Ecohealth early-careerists determination to engage professionally on mitigating climate change, ecocentrism or the anthropocosmic vision is within the early-careerists' *image of the future* for Ecohealth practice. This inclusion is already represented through on-going Ecohealth efforts that promote enhanced collaboration based upon ecological units such as watersheds. Engaging on the global food security challenge will involve an ecocentric consideration of capacity, such as that for marine bioregions and our global dependence upon fisheries for protein. We suggest both early-careerists and established researchers recognize the need for the aforementioned form of a *Yin-Yang balance* within Ecohealth. As discussed above promoting and developing Ecohealth to meet SDGs may be best represented by placing more focus on that balance.

There is perhaps a need to resolve a related, existing inconsistency within the Ecohealth Association regarding organizational scope, represented by the inclusive approach to ecocentric projects (for example at conferences) when compared to an underlying medical-model focus as well as the Kunming Statement having been solely linked to “human-centred ecosystems”. The move towards enhanced Ecohealth collaboration and balance between the two components of this *Yin-Yang design*, could perhaps best become more generally prominent within the Association. This inclusion should be less dependent upon the vision and future action of early-careerists. The analysis of early-careerist survey results and perceived national priorities outlined in the supplemental online material suggest a

global need and desire to project Ecohealth beyond *human-centred ecosystems*. In Kunming, this perspective led to representatives from Nepal, Kenya, the Philippines and Canada organizing a 2014 workshop on Paraprofessional Ecohealth Practitioners at the Montreal conference; inclusive of the two suggested tenets. An Ecohealth paradigm that seeks to hold the two described approaches in balance could create the strength of the Chinese concept of *Yin-Yang* and promote the collaboration platform required to best contribute to future SDGs along the environment—human health nexus, as initiated by the 2012 Ecohealth Kunming Statement.

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