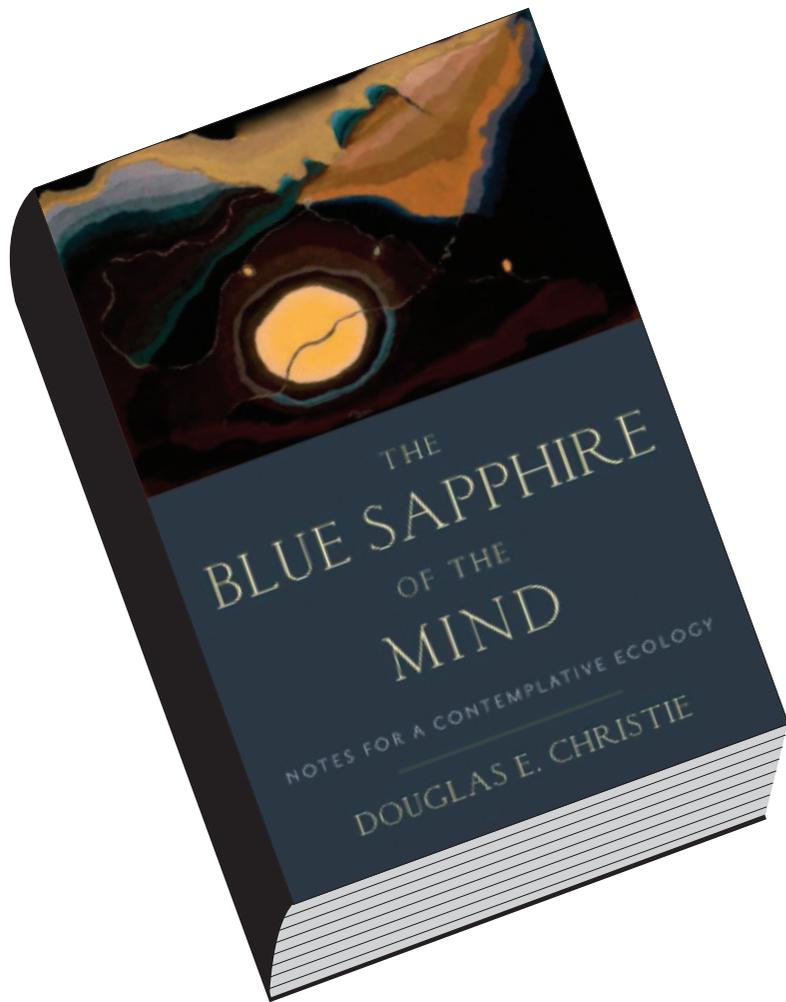


# To know, to care, to protect

Jules Pretty agrees that we must deepen our feelings for the world if we are to live sustainably



**The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology**  
By Douglas E. Christie  
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There is urgent business afoot. How should we live, when so many signals about the future are turning out to be alarm calls? Across the planet, we are converging on ways of living that do not bring expected increases in well-being, yet do result in using up too much of nature. The planet cannot resource this fast convergence, and large-scale systems failure is possible. Material culture has sadly failed both the affluent and the poorest, although the former do not seem to know it.

The options are simple: deny it all, or think differently about who we are and how we wish to live.

In this remarkable book, Douglas Christie, a theologian and academic, sets out to explore the concept of contemplative ecology. This has five components: the delicacy of spiritual practice bound to particular places; an

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understanding of both interior and exterior life; a route for how healing work may chart possibilities for both people and places; a commitment to social and political transformation; and most importantly, a focus on paying attention.

Contemplative ecology is an effort to find the language and practice that grounds responses to an increasingly degraded natural world in more than utilitarian terms. Christie has many insights on the need for both a greening of religion and a spiritual ecology, by which spiritual thought and practice is enriched by situations in the natural world, and ecological understanding is given added depth by including traditions of spiritual thought and practice. We already know well that natural places are good for mental well-being and health. Here, then, is the scoping of how mind meets land.

Paying attention offers an interesting landscape. We know that, on average, people now spend less time in natural places; we know too that children have become the most disconnected, no longer ranging free as they once did. In this way, memories of place are not formed, attachments no longer created.

In the UK, under-5 infant mortality fell from 21.8 per 100,000 in 1960 to 5 per 100,000 in 2006; yet, currently, obesity affects 16 per cent of 10-year-olds, and mental ill-health afflicts one in ten 10- to 16-year-olds. Both fitness and fatness tend to track into adulthood: further problems await.

A simple question rests at the centre of a need for substantially different consumption patterns: how can we be persuaded to retain possessions for longer, and look after places better? Attention that leads to attachment could help, and cathexis – the process of charging an object, activity or place with emotional energy – produces meaning. And possessions and places with meaning tend not to be substituted, and therefore are more likely to be kept and protected for a long time. This in turn leads to greater well-being.

Christie suggests a kind of bricolage, the combination of both text and experience, the library and the field, for the project of deepening attention. But paying attention needs great courage. The interior territory can

be a dangerous place, where we might come upon inner demons and embedded practices. Our tendency is to think of nature as “out there” rather than also “in here”. Deepening our own feelings for the world might increase our capacity to live responsibly.

Christie weaves the personal and analytical into a book organised into chapters on immersion in the land, the gift of tears, place and home, the art of attention, the song of the world, reciprocity and intimacy, the emptied mind, and what paradise might look like. The writing is sparse and deep, clear and beckoning.

*The Blue Sapphire of the Mind* will become an important milestone in the long tradition of distinguished nature and place writing from North America – from Henry David Thoreau to Aldo Leopold, Annie Dillard to Keith Basso, Peter Matthiessen to Barry Lopez and Gary Snyder to Christie himself.

Basso wrote of the Western Apache, for whom stories about places create the language for the land to work on our minds, “we are, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine”. Some solutions to the world’s problems can be found in this book.

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