



# Eco-reciprocity and the Moral Obligation of Naturopathic Medicine

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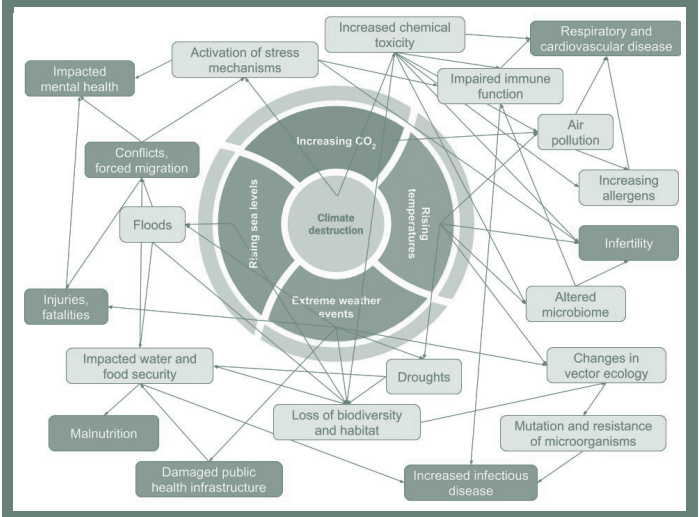
Human health is inextricably and reciprocally linked to environmental health. We are fundamentally part of nature, and it is impossible to be healthy in an unhealthy environment.<sup>1</sup> Environmental toxicity and climate change created by human actions cause catastrophic and potentially irreparable damage to the health of species and ecosystems.<sup>2</sup> North American naturopathic doctors promise to “preserve the health of our planet for ourselves and future generations.”<sup>3</sup> Deliberate action must be taken by the naturopathic community to increase stewardship of the natural world.

The anthropogenic degradation of the natural world has a multitude of detrimental effects on human health,<sup>5,6</sup> a reality that has been known for decades but pitifully acted on.<sup>7</sup> It is broadly agreed that global warming does and will continue to cause a rise in both noncommunicable, and vector-borne infectious diseases (such as Lyme); increased famines, fires and floods; increased migration, violence and social destructuring; worsening prevalence of infertility; and rising rates of mental health concerns. The costs of these impacts are personal, societal and economic.<sup>8</sup> The mechanisms are complex and interconnected, both proximal and distal<sup>9</sup> (Figure 1).

Modern naturopathic medical practice has roots in nature cure, and traditional and Indigenous healing practices that are grounded in a reciprocal relationship with the natural world. We rely on the healing power of nature in the form of water, air, food and plants; we know that time in nature promotes health;<sup>10</sup> we recognize obstacles to cure that are often inherent to a built and manufactured world,<sup>11</sup> such as the impact of urban design on levels of physical activity.<sup>12</sup> If we are to promote health and treat the causes of disease, we must look beyond the individual to consider the environment in which they live.

*“But man is a part of nature and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself.” Rachel Carson<sup>4</sup>*

**FIGURE 1: Mechanisms and effects of anthropogenic climate change on human health (from the author)**



The full effects of the environment on health, however, are complex (see figure 1). Worldwide, the causes of disease are more and more prevalently being linked to a modern, Western lifestyle, environmental toxicity and climate destruction. If individuals do not have access to healthy food, clean water, clean air and a safe home due to climate degradation, it will become impossible to optimize health, and much more difficult to prevent or treat disease.<sup>5,6,8</sup>

Vulnerable and marginalized populations are the first and most significantly affected by environmental impacts.<sup>5,13</sup> Communities that lack the resources to rebuild in the wake of extreme weather events (such as Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana<sup>14</sup>), are less resilient in the face of climate change. Individuals who are already experiencing food insecurity and inadequate housing are more likely to suffer from respiratory conditions exacerbated by extreme heat and air pollution.<sup>15</sup> If we are to truly seek to promote healthy, equitable communities, we must foster more inclusive practices and engagement in social and environmental advocacy.

Actively caring for our environment will ensure sustainability for future generations around the globe. Slowing and possibly reversing the impacts of climate degradation will require a ‘whole systems’, transdisciplinary approach that takes into consideration (non-exhaustively and in no particular order)<sup>7,16-18</sup>: Indigenous self-determination, gender equity, electoral reform, shifting economic models, and revolutionized design for urban development, transportation and education.

*“It is a curious situation that the sea, from which life first arose should now be threatened by the activities of one form of that life. But the sea, though changed in a sinister way, will continue to exist; the threat is rather to life itself.”*  
*Rachel Carson<sup>19</sup>*

The Earth herself is subject to the *Vis medicatrix naturae*; she will adapt and modify (see <http://www.gaiatheory.org/overview> for more on the theory that the Earth is a living system). However, if we are willfully ignorant of the impact of our choices on the environment, we are causing harm, both to the environment directly, and ultimately to ourselves and our patients. Escalating climate degradation will cause a collapse of the entire web of existence.<sup>20</sup> Although an abundance of data about the loss of habitat and biodiversity has not appeared to substantially prompt coordinated efforts to reverse climate degradation, let us remember that humans are just as enmeshed in that web of existence as all other species, and equally at risk.<sup>20</sup> Anthropocentrizing the issue may be the necessary impetus to motivate action.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond our particular consideration of nature in our healing paradigm, an argument can be made that all healthcare providers are morally responsible to advocate for climate action (Figure 2).<sup>22</sup>

**FIGURE 2: An argument for the moral obligation of naturopathic doctors to advocate for climate action. (from the author with acknowledgement of citation 22)**

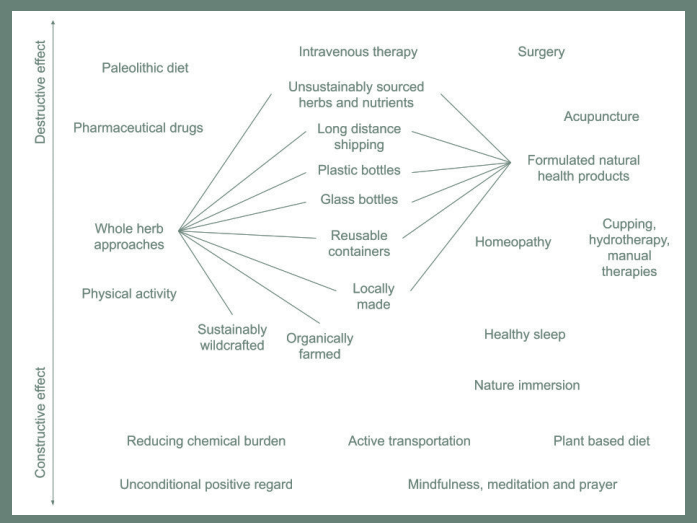
01	<b>Expertise</b>	• Naturopathic doctors are experienced and knowledgeable about the management of climate-change-related health conditions.
02	<b>Proximal</b>	• NDs work directly with individuals who are impacted by climate change
03	<b>Effective</b>	• NDs are effective communicators and advocates, especially when evidence-informed
04	<b>Cost/Risk</b>	• There is minimal personal cost or risk associated with engaging in advocacy; in fact, public engagement may directly benefit practitioners and their communities
05	<b>Unique</b>	• Naturopathic doctors uniquely value the reciprocal relationship between the environment and human health
06	<b>Severity</b>	• The impact of climate degradation is such that all healthcare providers should be alarmed, especially given the commitment to do no harm.
07	<b>Public Trust</b>	• Silence equates to complicity, eroding public trust in the profession. Conversely, active engagement may elevate public awareness and trust.

Naturopathic doctors can consider a number of actions:

**1. Make explicit connections with patients between their health goals and the environment.** This may require speaking directly to an individual’s personal motivations. Examples might include promoting active transportation and a plant-based diet as part of a strategy to achieve optimal body composition and manage metabolic disease. Couples seeking to improve fertility, or families wanting to address ADHD or autism will be eager to reduce environmental toxins. Encouraging individuals affected by depression or anxiety related to the news cycle might benefit from taking purposeful, positive action on climate change. These steps, no matter how small, can foster empowerment and active hope.

**2. Consider the environmental impact of health care practice,<sup>23</sup> and overlap an environmental hierarchy of therapeutics** with therapeutic decision-making Like all shared-decision-making, this requires integration with evidence-informed practice, a knowledge of the safety and effectiveness of various treatment options, and ultimately informed consent by patient. This may prompt some practitioners to opt out of offering certain approaches for environmental reasons, perhaps being ethically obliged to refer to someone who will, such as intravenous therapy or acupuncture. Destructive environmental impacts may be a result of sourcing (is the herb sustainably farmed or wildcrafted?), production (how heavily processed is the product), transportation (is the product locally made?), or resultant waste (is the packaging or product reusable or recyclable?) of the therapeutic intervention. Some interventions may in fact have a net constructive effect on the environment, such as eating a plant-based diet, nature immersion (which may promote environmental stewardship in addition to improving personal health), or actively aiming to reduce toxic load.

**FIGURE 3: A proposed environmental hierarchy of therapeutics. (from the author)**



**3. Centre nature in your practice.** Consider seeing your patients in an outdoor setting, being mindful of confidentiality concerns (please see the article by Dr. Denis Marier, ND<sup>24</sup>). Providing “nature prescriptions” and education on nature immersion benefits individual health<sup>25</sup> and can promote a spirit of stewardship.<sup>26</sup>

**4. Reflect on personal and professional habits to minimize our own environmental footprint.** There are a multitude of ways this can be done, and can be communicated to patients as a statement of commitment as an educational and role modelling strategy. It is the responsibility of the individual to reflect on the degree to which these actions will have a significant effect, and to balance this with their own personal capacity. Examples to explore include:

- a. Choosing to bank at a credit union which does not invest in fossil fuels, and to invest personal assets in an environmentally responsible way (e.g. SolarShare Co-op)
  - b. Utilizing a renewable energy service to power clinic and home activities
  - c. Avoiding the excessive use of air conditioning and heating
  - d. Using active or public transportation to reach work (and choosing clinic space that is reachable by these methods)
  - e. Reducing plastics and using reusable supplies as much as possible (towels, sheets, gowns)
  - f. Attend conferences locally or virtually to avoid emissions from car or air travel
5. **Be an agent of change and make it public.** To engage in promoting public health requires activism on the part of individuals and groups. The Canadian Association of Naturopathic Doctors (CAND) and other professional associations (such as the newly created Naturopathic Doctors for Environmental and Social Trust (NEST)) can take part in lobby actions to push for climate action. You or your business can support and collaborate with organizations that are advocating for change.

Some have proposed that we add *scientia critica* to our principles.<sup>27</sup> The best available evidence tells us that the environmental situation is dire,<sup>28</sup> and the knowledge and technology exists to slow the tide. Naturopathic doctors are educators and leaders, and logically positioned to highlight the links between climate destruction and health to our patients and to the community. For this purpose (and perhaps for others), let's consider adding the principle of *vocare* - to advocate. Let us advocate for climate action, in our personal lives, in our work with patients, and our engagement in our communities. Let us look to Indigenous wisdom for guidance to foster a reciprocal relationship with the environment and to walk gently on the Earth in order to preserve and protect the land, air and water for seven generations and beyond. 🌱

## About the Author

**Leslie Solomonian** is a naturopathic doctor and associate professor at the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine. While she was raised to engage in environmental stewardship in her personal life, she despairs that individual actions will be insufficient to avoid climate breakdown. She is actively engaging in advocacy and non-violent disruption both within and outside the profession in the active hope of preserving the health of the planet.

## Resources for Naturopathic Doctors

- **Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy.** Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone. New World Library. 2012. [www.activehope.info](http://www.activehope.info)
- **Pachamama Alliance** is a global community that offers people the chance to learn, connect, engage, travel and cherish life for the purpose of creating a sustainable future that works for all. [www.pachamama.org/engage](http://www.pachamama.org/engage)
- **Project Drawdown** gathers and facilitates a broad coalition of researchers, scientists, graduate students, PhDs, post-docs, policy makers, business leaders and activists to assemble and present the best available information on climate solutions in order to describe their beneficial financial, social and environmental impact over the next thirty years. [www.drawdown.org/](http://www.drawdown.org/)
- **Global Footprint Network** is an international nonprofit organization which envisions a future where all can thrive within the means of our one planet, enables through a mission to help end ecological overshoot by making ecological limits central to decision-making. [www.footprintnetwork.org](http://www.footprintnetwork.org)
- **Climate change toolkit** for health professionals; curated by the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, which works to better human health by protecting the planet. <https://cape.ca/campaigns/climate-health-policy/climate-change-toolkit-for-health-professionals/cape.ca/campaigns/climate-health-policy/climate-change-toolkit-for-health-professionals/>
- **Bullfrog Power**; reduce your emissions footprint and support the growth of renewable energy in Canada. [www.bullfrogpower.com/](http://www.bullfrogpower.com/)
- **The Leap** exists to inject new urgency and bold ideas into confronting the intersecting crises of our time: climate change, racism and inequality. <https://theleap.org>
- **Women's Healthy Environments Network (WHEN)** is a trusted source of credible information on emerging environmental health topics, promoting the environment as a key determinant of public health. [www.womenshealthyenvironments.ca](http://www.womenshealthyenvironments.ca)
- **The Environmental Working Group's** mission is to empower people to live healthier lives in a healthier environment. With breakthrough research and education, we drive consumer choice and civic action. [www.ewg.org/](http://www.ewg.org/)
- **Environmental Defence** is a leading Canadian advocacy organization that works with government, industry and individuals to defend clean water, a safe climate and healthy communities. [www.environmentaldefence.ca](http://www.environmentaldefence.ca).

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