

Ecological Intelligence by Daniel Goleman
A Book Review by Shari Childers, PhD

At some point in every semester, regardless of what college course I am teaching, I pose the same question to my students: "Where is *nature*?" After a few references to forests and mountains—examples of the enduring interpretation of nature-as-only-wilderness—I ask them, "Yes, but where is nature *in this room*?" Generally speaking, I get the same blank stares from each class. Most people in contemporary American culture (the only culture of which I can speak) have been taught and re-taught that there is a clear division between nature and culture. Culture is here, where I am. Nature is over there, usually a virgin wilderness. No wonder we are having problems getting people to see that they can or should change their behaviors, right? Littering *here* or driving *here* can't impact nature—it's way over there!

And it's hard to blame people because our cultural indoctrination begins very early. My son, a kindergartener this past year, was required to distinguish between natural and cultural items on worksheets—no room for fuzzy overlap here. Unfortunately, it is this legacy of binary thinking that shields my college students from the alarming awareness that everything in our classroom comes from nature: each item in the room required extraction, production, and will require disposal at some point—all processes that clearly puncture the supposed nature/culture divide.

Daniel Goleman, the author of several other books including the #1 bestseller Emotional Intelligence (1995), explores the often-hidden connections between the decisions that consumers make daily, in thousands of Big-Mart store aisles far from "nature," and our collective ecological impacts in his latest book, Ecological Intelligence: How Knowing the Hidden Impact of What We Buy Can Change Everything (2009). That consumer decisions affect manufacturer choices is not in question. That consumer decisions affect our personal health, the well-being of other humans, and the planet is also not in question. Goleman explains, however, that until recently, there have been two significant problems with using consumer choice to "green" marketplace values. He explores these problems and their solutions, using accessible examples, and in the process provides any reader who is new to the discussion of personal, social, and environmental concerns an understanding of the issues and a very basic insight into their interrelationships and complexities. What may be more important, though, is that he gives readers a new vocabulary for engaging in this complex global problem.

The first problem that Goleman points out is that there has been no way to quantify the impacts of today's global products on myself, others, or the Earth. More specifically, it is hard to make ethically sound decisions as a consumer—even if I am entirely dedicated to doing so—because it is so hard to understand the hidden impacts of global products. How can I begin to understand the impact, for example, of something like my cell phone? Since products no longer come from one specific crafts(wo)man, one person who is responsible for the product from inception to purchasing to final product, how can the relative impacts of a given item even be *measured*?

Goleman suggests that the answer to this quandary lies in a new field, *industrial ecology*, which dates to the mid-1990s. This field, he explains, "exists at the cusp where chemistry, physics, and engineering meet ecology, and integrates those fields to quantify the impacts on nature of manmade things" (4). Impacts are quantified by collecting data regarding the extraction, production, transportation, and disposal of any individual product and consolidating it into a single Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) report. Such a process now makes possible the kind of awareness that has, up to this point, been impossible.

Of course, the second issue is that good information is only as good as my willingness or ability to find it. This is the problem of *asymmetrical information*: those who have the information have not always been inclined to guarantee that the information is broadly available. Goleman uses the health concerns in trans fats as an example. Though the connection between trans fats and heart disease was overwhelmingly clear to subscribers of medical journals as early as 1993, it took almost another ten years to disseminate that information and effect changes. A few particularly health-conscious individuals may have heard the news early on, but what of the average consumer—the one who may want to know but does not comb medical journals? Who expects the FDA and product-labeling to warn of significant concerns? Up to now, there has been no quick and painless way to transmit this information to consumers.

Goleman argues that such *radical transparency* of product information is absolutely necessary to make sound ecological purchase decisions. In other words, this is how we raise our ecological

intelligence. And fortunately the solution—this radical awareness at the consumer level—is not something that we have to wait for. Goleman points to Goodguide.com as a model for the kind of information sharing that he predicts will reshape the ecological ethics of the marketplace. Goodguide.com is the venture of a non-profit collective of people with impeccable credentials, and their sole purpose is to provide easy-to-use product ratings to interested consumers. Each product receives a general rating that is the average of three scores: one for health, one for environment, and one for social justice. All information on which the ratings are based is transparent and available on the site for those who are interested—or people can just look at the numbers. In this way consumers can easily find out the toxins of concern in a specific health product or whether a company uses sweatshop labor or has a trend of giving back to communities. This widespread increase in ecological intelligence will make it possible for interested consumers to reward ethical companies—to vote with their dollars. When companies compete only based on price, as Goleman explains, there is a race to the bottom, a situation that has exacerbated many environmental, health, and social justice problems. With the advent of radical transparency, though, consumer awareness of impacts has the potential to convert the “bottom line” into “bottom lines”—companies might be forced to compete on the basis of a variety of ethical considerations.

It is important to recognize that the book is limited: it is limited to marketplace considerations and my role and responsibility as a consumer. Not that I believe that Goleman had any other intentions for the book, but the ardent anti-capitalist is likely to be disappointed because Goleman seems to go out of his way to propose a solution that will allow people to continue shopping, but shop smarter. While allowing for the fact that we should all purchase less in general, he focuses on how we might achieve a genuinely “green” capitalism (rather than the merely “greenwashed” version that he claims manufacturers are attempting to get away with at present). Whether this is realism on his part or a lack of imagination, someone seeking a good read about the shift in underlying values that will most likely be required for a genuine, full-scale ecological transformation is not looking for this book.

Having said that, Goleman’s book does an excellent job of avoiding the most common downfall that my students point out in typical environmentalist literature: perhaps *because* he limits his considerations to shopping, something that we all have to do anyway, his book does not leave readers overwhelmed by the apocalyptic visions or the seemingly unattainable idealism that environmentalists often lean on (and that often irritates people). Instead, Goleman confers a new, ecological twist on the feminist slogan that “the personal is political” as he shows readers how thoroughly nature and culture are intertwined. Because he is able to clearly demonstrate that each of our individual shopping decisions has distinctly ecological impacts, if the information in Goleman’s book were to spread, it is possible that my college students and others like them might soon come to recognize that each choice matters. And what is more, they might know that the tools are now available, Goodguide among others, to help them make better choices. The net effect of Goleman’s book is a distinctly positive and empowering lasting impression because if what I do *matters*, then with the right information *there is so much that I can do*.