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From Ecophobia to Eutierria: Ecological Emotions in Delia Owens's Where the Crawdads Sing

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Abstract

Delia Owens's bestselling novel Where the Crawdads Sing (2018) transcends its genres of bildungsroman and mystery to offer a profound meditation on the human–nature relationship. This paper employs the theoretical framework of ecological emotions—the spectrum of feelings arising from our connection to, or disconnection from, the natural world—to analyze the novel's central conflict and resolution. It argues that the narrative dramatizes a critical shift from negative ecological emotions, epitomized by the townspeople's ecophobia and the anthropocentric hubris of Chase Andrews, toward positive ecological emotions, embodied by the protagonist Kya Clark's deep biophilia and her eventual experience of eutierria (a feeling of oneness with the earth). Through a close reading of the text, this study examines how Kya's identity is constructed through her symbiotic relationships with the marsh's flora and fauna, and how she becomes stigmatized as the Ecological Other by a society plagued by fear and prejudice. The analysis then traces the novel's arc of reconciliation: how empathy and ecological knowledge, disseminated through Kya's scientific work, facilitate a communal transformation. This transformation sees the wetlands re evaluated from a worthless wasteland to a vital ecosystem, and Kya from a feared outcast to a respected voice. The paper concludes that Where the Crawdads Sing functions as a literary blueprint for environmental reconciliation, suggesting that fostering positive ecological emotions is essential for overcoming social and ecological alienation and building a sustainable, symbiotic future.

Keywords

Delia Owens; Where the Crawdads Sing; ecological emotions; ecocriticism; environmental humanities.

1. Introduction

In an age shaped by the accelerating crises of climate change and biodiversity loss, the environmental humanities have increasingly turned to narrative as a means for understanding and transforming human relationships with the more-than-human world. *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018) by Delia Owens has emerged as a significant cultural touchstone in this discourse, captivating millions with its evocative story of Kya Clark, the so-called "Marsh Girl," who survives and grows up in the coastal wetlands of North Carolina. While the novel has garnered popular acclaim for its lyrical prose and gripping plot, its deeper importance lies in its nuanced exploration of what contemporary scholarship designates as "ecological emotions"—the "full spectrum of feelings that arise from a human's connection or disconnection with the natural world" [1]. As a zoologist and conservationist, Owens infuses her narrative with a profound ecological consciousness, portraying the marsh not merely as backdrop, but as a character that shapes, nurtures, and ultimately redeems the protagonist.

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This paper contends that *Where the Crawdads Sing* constructs a deliberate and transformative emotional arc in its depiction of ecological feelings. The novel opens in a state of deep dissonance: the life-affirming emotions that Kya cultivates through her symbiotic existence in the marsh are contrasted sharply with the negative, fearful emotions—specifically ecophobia—harboured by the nearby town of Barkley Cove. This emotional divide becomes manifest in social prejudice, the othering of both Kya and her wetland home. Yet the narrative advances toward a hard-won reconciliation, mediated through empathy and the dissemination of ecological knowledge. Through Kya's journey from isolation to integration, and the community's progression from fear to respect, the novel proposes that the road to environmental sustainability is as much an emotional and ethical project as it is a scientific or political one.

To substantiate this argument, this study proceeds in four parts. First, it establishes the theoretical underpinnings of ecological emotions, drawing on the work of Glenn Albrecht, Simon Estok, and others, to define key concepts such as biophilia, ecophobia, and eutierria. The second section examines the formation of Kya's positive ecological identity, demonstrating how her co-growth with plants, companionship with animals, and attunement to natural rhythms forge a resilient selfhood rooted in the land. The third section analyses the negative ecological emotions of the community, unpacking the stigmatization of Kya as the *Ecological Other* [11] and the anthropocentric hubris that precipitates tragedy. The final section considers the novel's resolution, arguing that the bridging of emotional and ecological divides through empathy and altruism models the possibility of cultivating a community founded on reciprocal symbiosis. By mapping this emotional metamorphosis, this paper situates *Where the Crawdads Sing* as a significant work within the environmental humanities, one that harnesses the power of narrative to advocate for a more empathetic and interconnected way of being in the world.

1.1. Theoretical Framework: The Spectrum of Ecological Emotions

The concept of "ecological emotions" offers a critical lens through which to analyse the complex psychological and cultural dynamics at play in *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Rather than restricting itself to a rational or moral register of environmental issues, this framework foregrounds the affective dimension—acknowledging how feelings mediate our relationship with nature. For instance, Glenn Albrecht introduces a lexicon of "Earth-emotions," defining them as "the psychic or emotional relationship between an individual and their sense of place" [1]. This definition invites us to see emotions about environment not as incidental but foundational—they exist along a broad continuum from negative to positive.

On the negative end of that spectrum is ecophobia. Simon Estok coins this term as an "irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world" [5]. Ecophobia arises from a dualistic self/other mindset that projects fear and hostility onto nature, thereby justifying its exploitation. Its forms range from visceral disgust of certain landscapes (swamps or marshes) and creatures (insects or snakes) to systemic indifference that allows for ecological degradation. Estok argues that ecophobia is a "disposition that allows humanity to do bad things to the natural world [6]." Moreover, ecophobia often intersects with other forms of prejudice—misogyny, classism, speciesism—as nature and those associated with it are jointly devalued.

At the opposite end of the spectrum lie biophilia and eutierria. Biophilia, popularised by E. O. Wilson, describes an "innate human tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes" [15]. It expresses the instinctual affinity humans feel for other living systems. Building on this, Albrecht coins eutierria to capture "a good and positive feeling of oneness with the Earth and its life forces," a state in which the boundaries between self and rest of nature dissolve, yielding a "reassuring sense of harmony and connection with the world" [1]. This goes beyond mere admiration of a scenic view—it describes a transformative, almost spiritual, emotional merging with the ecosystem.

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Contemporary studies in environmental psychology reinforce the relevance of these concepts. Research indicates that a robust sense of "nature-connectedness" is positively correlated with pro-environmental attitudes and higher psychological well-being [3]. Conversely, disconnection from nature often associates with apathy and inaction in the face of ecological crises [7]. Scholars such as Kałwak and Weihgold suggest we should understand ecological emotions as "relational phenomena," deeply embedded within communal and cultural contexts, and capable of acting as "catalysts for collective engagement" [8].

This theoretical framework proves especially useful for deconstructing Owens's novel. The conflict at Barkley Cove can be read as a clash between Kya's lived experience of biophilia and eutierria, and the community's entrenched ecophobia. The narrative trajectory thus charts a collective emotional journey—from alienation and fear toward connection and empathy—illustrating how transformation of ecological emotions is a pre-condition for both social healing and environmental sustainability.

2. Kya Clark's Positive Ecological Emotions: Forging Identity in the Wetland

Abandoned by her family and ostracised by the townspeople, Kya Clark turns not solely to the marsh for survival, but for solace, instruction, and identity. Her emerging emotional bond with the marsh becomes the foundation of her self-understanding and moral world—embodying the concepts of biophilia and eutierria through its depth and continuity. This bond is cultivated through three interrelated processes: co-growth with plants, trans-species companionship with animals, and an attunement to the rhythms of the natural world. Together these channels illustrate how positive ecological emotions form not only character but worldview.

2.1. "Rooted solid in this earth": Co-Growth and Plant-Kin

From her earliest days, Kya's identity is literally and metaphorically rooted in marshland. Owens writes of Kya: "Kya laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her mother." [10]. This vivid phrasing signals that Kya is not simply in the marsh; she is of it. The earth breathes, the marsh becomes mother, and Kya is rooted "solid in this earth." Her experience transcends mere habitation and moves into a domain of kinship, symbiosis, and mutual becoming.

Daily life reinforces this co-growth: Kya forages for edible roots, sleeps to the "wind-rough whispers" of palmettos, and marks time not by human calendars but by the seasonal shifts of sycamores and marsh grass. The marsh's flora supports her physically and emotionally, offering solace and structure as she matures. As one commentators notes, "nature and Kya are strongly interlinked… supporting and acting as metaphors for one another." In effect, Kya's growth, resilience, and cycles of hardship and renewal are mirroring the vegetative rhythms of her surroundings.

This deeply embodied connection can be understood through the lens of topophilia—a love of place. Whereas the townspeople designate the wetlands as a "wasteland," for Kya the marsh is homeland. She presses her bare feet into the mud, lies among the ferns, physically grounding herself in the earth. This sense of place becomes a psychological bulwark: it supplies her with strength to endure abandonment and social isolation.

Recent environmental-psychology research supports such a claim: greater nature- connectedness correlates with improved mental well-being and resilience. Studies show that people who feel themselves embedded in nature report stronger psychological recovery and lower levels of distress. ("Connectedness with trees, wildlife, and nature … associated with better psychological well-being.") [9]. Thus Kya's relationship with the marsh

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is not merely metaphorical; it constitutes a lived emotional scaffolding that supports her survival, self-understanding, and eventual flourishing.

Moreover, Kya's relationship with the land aligns with the land ethic as articulated by Aldo Leopold: the land is "a community to which we belong" (Leopold viii). By experiencing the marsh as mother, teacher, and kin, Kya subsumes herself into this community. Her identity becomes ecocentric—she understands herself as one thread in the biotic web rather than the centre of it. In so doing, her subjectivity stands in direct contrast to the anthropocentrism of Barkley Cove.

2.2. "Winged Soul": Trans-Species Companionship and Empathy

In the absence of human kin, Kya forges relationships with the marsh's animals. Her interactions with seagulls, herons, fireflies and more are characterised not by superficial anthropomorphism but by genuine trans-species empathy. After being tormented by school-children, she turns to the beach where "the gulls' gentle company" allows her a space to release humiliation and pain [10]. The marsh creatures thus become her social circle, a community of non-humans whose acceptance contrasts sharply with human rejection.

These relationships serve as pedagogical too. Kya imitates the crouch of a sandpiper chick to hide from predators, watches crows forage for mussels, and learns adaptation from fireflies: one species of female mimics the mating flash of another to lure and consume its male. This natural phenomenon later supplies Kya with a metaphor for human deceit in her relationship with Chase Andrews. As Alexa Weik von Mossner argues, narratives evoking empathy for nature "bridge the gap between abstract ecological concerns and personal affective engagement" [13]. In Kya's case, her empathy leads to ecological altruism: she nurses an injured gull, refrains from collecting eggs during breeding seasons, and recognizes her moral obligations toward the marsh's non-human denizens.

Here, the positive ecological emotions of affinity, care, and respect become the foundation for pro-environmental behaviour. Kya's emotional bond with animals partly defines her identity: she is no longer simply surviving in nature; she is embedded within and responsible to it. In a cultural context that frequently diminishes or exploits wetlands and their inhabitants, Kya's relational engagement constitutes a radical inversion of dominant anthropocentric paradigms.

2.3. Resonance with Natural Rhythms and the Path to Eutierria

Beyond relationships with specific organisms, Kya finds profound meaning in attuning herself to the marsh's broader rhythms: the tides, the seasons, the cycle of life and death. Her life is governed not by human schedules but by nature's cadence. She declares she is "as sure as the tides" that she belongs to a "natural sequence" [10]. This alignment gives her existence continuity and coherence in face of prior trauma. The daily sunset provides closure; the return of spring brings renewal after a lonely winter.

This attunement culminates in a state of eutierria, a term coined by Glenn Albrecht to describe "a good and positive feeling of oneness with the Earth and its life-forces." [1]. Kya's sense of self expands to include the ecosystem; she internalises the marsh's logics. In the prologue, Owens writes: "A swamp knows all about death, and doesn't necessarily define it as tragedy, certainly not a sin." [10]. Kya learns this lesson: mortality is not an aberration but part of renewal. Her own eventual peaceful death in her boat at an old age, and her burial in the marsh, are portrayed not as an end but as a home-coming—a seamless merging with the "natural sequence."

Through Kya, Owens authors a model of human life lived in ecological harmony—where positive ecological emotions supply not just solace but a coherent and resilient worldview. In doing so, she invites us to reconsider the boundary between self and place, human and more-than-human, positioning ecological identity as integral to ethical life.

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3. The Toxicity of Negative Ecological Emotions: Othering and Alienation

In sharp contrast to Kya Clark's symbiotic relationship with the marsh, the social world of Barkley Cove is dominated by negative ecological emotions—particularly ecophobia, an irrational fear and hostility toward the natural world. This set of feelings, when fused with existing social prejudices, manifests in the marginalisation of both the wetlands and Kya herself, who is cast as the *Ecological Other* [11]. Through two intertwined pathways—stigmatization of the marsh and its inhabitant, and anthropocentric hubris escalating into nature's retribution—the novel reveals how negative ecological emotions damage social and environmental flourishing.

3.1. Stigmatisation of the "Marsh Girl" and the "Wasteland"

From the outset, the wetlands of Barkley Cove are perceived by its dominant culture as a problem: a swamp, a wasteland to be drained and developed rather than a living ecosystem to respect. Historically in the United States, wetlands have often been regarded as "wastelands… to be avoided," and subject to large-scale drainage campaigns. In Barkley Cove, this attitude is echoed when Tate tells Kya that many locals believe the marsh "should be drained and developed," ignoring its vital ecological role as a nursery for marine life [10]. This dismissive view of the marsh is not just an ecological disregard—it is a moral and cultural devaluation of place.

In tandem with devaluing the land, the community casts Kya as its natural reflection — or rather, its naturalised "other." Because she chooses the marsh as her world, they dub her the "Marsh Girl" — a label heavy with disdain. The women of the town whisper that she is feral, unclean, and less than human; children taunt her, local shops refuse her service, and the police treat her home as a place where "rats kill rats" [10]. Such language literally dehumanises and denies her subjecthood.

This dynamic exemplifies what Sarah Jaquette Ray terms "ecological othering": the construction of certain humans (and by extension, places) as threats to nature, or unfit for it, and thus outside the moral community of ecological subjects. Ray writes that environmental discourses often draw "problematic lines between ecological 'subjects'—those who are good for and belong in nature—and ecological 'others'—those who are threats to or out of place in nature." In Barkley Cove, Kya's affinity with the marsh renders her suspect in a society that values control, cleanliness, and human dominance over nature.

An ecofeminist reading further exposes how the othering of Kya intersects gender, class and ecological marginalisation. Ecofeminism argues that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature derive from the same patriarchal logic of domination. In the novel, Kya's marginalisation is bound up with her feminine embodiment and her literal rooting in the marsh-landscape — both belong to what the town perceives as wild, uncontrolled, and taboo. As one scholar observes, Kya's discrimination "is based on the link with nature she develops" [2]. By identifying with the land, she falls outside the norms of respectability defined by patriarchal and anthropocentric culture.

The stigmatization has real, damaging consequences. Kya's social exclusion magnifies her isolation; the law disregards her vulnerability in the swamp; her body and home are treated as disposable. The marsh, labeled "wasteland," and Kya, labeled "Marsh Girl," become joined in a cycle of devaluation, representing how negative ecological emotions underpin social injustice. Importantly, this is not simply an individual prejudice but a structural formation: the cultural system of Barkley Cove uses ecological fear to legitimise exclusion and dominance.

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3.2. Anthropocentric Hubris and Nature's Retribution

While the community's ecophobic sentiments create the conditions for exclusion, they find embodiment in the figure of Chase Andrews, who epitomises anthropocentric hubris. Chase perceives both nature and Kya as objects for his consumption and control. He mocks Kya's ecological literacy — "the girl who couldn't spell dog knew the Latin names of shells" [10] — simultaneously asserting his human superiority and belittling her knowledge. The marsh, in his view, is "a thing to be used, to boat and fish, or drain for farming" [10]. In his exploitative conception of nature, there is no reciprocity, no care—only dominance.

The narrative trajectory culminates in a powerful symbolic reversal: Chase falls from the fire-tower he uses to overlook the marsh, and the marsh "almost absorbed it silently, routinely. Hiding it for good" [10]. The structure built to dominate nature becomes the site of human fall. Though the novel frames it as self-defence by Kya, the imagery suggests a broader ecological moral: the marsh, once objectified and under siege, reclaims its agency. In doing so, the text suggests that nature, treated as an inferior, becomes the one that judges and transforms.

Here we witness the fatal outcome of negative ecological emotions. The discourse of fear and domination leads to violence—both social and ecological—and invites the very reckoning that the dominators feared. In this narrative moment, nature's agency is activated as a counter-force to anthropocentric arrogance. The swamp does not simply serve as backdrop; it becomes actor. Like the systemic injustices explored in environmental justice scholarship, the exploitation of nature is inseparable from the exploitation of people and places.

This reading aligns with ecojustice critique: when landscapes are devalued and their inhabitants relegated to "other," environmental harm and social harm follow in tandem. The draining, marginalising, or ignoring of wetlands in U.S. history illustrates that the same logic used to exploit land is used to dehumanise people. In Barkley Cove, the marsh becomes a site of retribution precisely because the society failed to recognise its worth, and Kya becomes the site of trauma because she inhabited the world the town refused to accept.

4. Reconciliation: Empathy, Altruism, and the Emergence of an Ecological Community

The final movement of *Where the Crawdads Sing* offers a powerful narrative of reconciliation, demonstrating how negative ecological emotions—ecophobia, prejudice, and fear of the *Other*—can be transformed through empathy, ecological education, and altruistic action. The trial of Kya, though initially a moment of conflict, ultimately serves as a crucible for the town's transformation, compelling the community to confront and reassess its biases against both Kya and the marsh.

4.1. Overcoming Prejudice through Empathy and Knowledge

Kya's acquittal is a crucial turning point in the novel, not only because it frees her from wrongful conviction but because it symbolizes the community's potential for emotional growth and moral redemption. Throughout the trial, Kya's lawyer, Tom Milton, addresses the jury's biases, challenging their deep-seated fear of the "wild" and urging them to view Kya as a human being rather than as the embodiment of their ecophobic fears. Milton's strategy hinges on presenting Kya's life as a testament to resilience and strength, asking the jury to see the humanity in the girl they had long excluded. As he explains, "Look at her … You can see it. You can see it in her eyes" [10]. This recognition of Kya's humanity begins the slow but steady process of dismantling years of social prejudice, offering a glimpse of how empathy can challenge deeply entrenched biases.

At the same time, the trial serves as a stage for Kya's hidden life as a naturalist and author to be revealed. Her books, which document the local flora, fauna, and ecosystems, offer a counter-

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narrative to the town's simplistic and negative perceptions of the marsh. As the townspeople come into contact with Kya's work, their understanding of the marsh shifts. No longer is it viewed as a "wasteland"; instead, it is recognized as a complex and invaluable ecosystem. In her books, Kya writes that the marsh "links the land to the sea, both needing the other" [10], introducing the idea of ecological interdependence. This shift in perception illustrates the profound impact of knowledge on transforming attitudes toward the environment.

Research in environmental communication supports this concept: when ecological information is communicated through relatable and trusted sources, it has the power to shift public attitudes. Schultz writes, "Compelling information from a relatable source can significantly alter attitudes toward environmental issues" [12]. Kya's position as an insider—both part of the community and deeply connected to the marsh—makes her a powerful voice in advocating for a more sustainable and empathetic worldview. Her journey, therefore, is not only one of personal redemption but also an educational catalyst that helps the townspeople view the environment through a more informed, nuanced lens.

This change in perspective is crucial. The trial's resolution does not simply clear Kya of a crime; it symbolizes a shift in the town's collective consciousness. Through the revelation of her scientific and poetic work, the townspeople begin to see the marsh—and by extension, Kya—not as objects of fear and exploitation, but as sources of wisdom and insight. This shift aligns with the broader argument in environmental philosophy that knowledge and empathy can dismantle the walls of ignorance and fear that so often govern human relations with the natural world.

4.2. From Emotion to Action: Building Reciprocal Symbiosis

The transition from emotional growth to tangible action is central to Kya's transformation from isolated survivor to community leader. Her emotional connection to the marsh—manifested through biophilia—does not remain abstract or passive. Instead, Kya's love for the marsh drives her to engage in direct action on its behalf. This is where her altruism becomes most evident: she does not hoard her knowledge of the marsh for personal gain but shares it with the very community that once rejected her. Through her writing, she educates the people of Barkley Cove, helping them to see the marsh not only as a vital part of their physical landscape but also as a critical element of their cultural and moral identity.

Kya's actions, though motivated by personal attachment, catalyze a broader shift in the town's relationship with its natural surroundings. Her decision to preserve the marshland for future generations marks the beginning of a community-wide movement toward ecological stewardship. This shift is symbolized when plans to develop her land are abandoned, and her property is eventually designated as a nature preserve. By choosing to protect the marsh, Kya transforms it from a place of fear into one of care and respect. This act of preservation not only benefits the environment but also serves as a model for others to follow.

The novel's narrative of ecological reconciliation aligns with the concept of reciprocal symbiosis, a term that denotes a mutually beneficial relationship between distinct entities. In an ecological sense, reciprocal symbiosis involves interactions where both parties thrive, not at the expense of one another but through shared support and care. This concept can be applied both to Kya's relationship with the marsh and to her relationship with the community. Over time, the rigid boundaries between human society and the natural world begin to dissolve. The town, once defined by its fear of the swamp and its exclusion of the "wild" Kya, gradually becomes a community that sees the marsh as a vital part of its identity, worthy of protection and care.

Kya's personal relationships also undergo transformation. Her bond with her brother, Jodie, is restored when they reconnect over their shared love for the marsh, and her relationship with Tate evolves into a lifelong partnership. These reconciliations mirror the larger ecological reconciliation at the heart of the novel. Just as Kya learns to trust again and build meaningful

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relationships, so too does the town learn to trust the marsh and treat it with respect. In this way, *Where the Crawdads Sing* presents an ecological vision in which healing and reconciliation occur not just on an individual level but within the larger social and environmental spheres.

Kya's legacy, both as a writer and as a protector of the marsh, exemplifies the importance of altruism in fostering environmental change. Her actions catalyze the town's respect for the marsh and create a foundation for future generations to appreciate the importance of ecological preservation. The transformation of Barkley Cove from a community that once feared the marsh into one that understands its value serves as a powerful reminder that emotional and ethical change can lead to concrete action. In this sense, the novel embodies the idea that empathy and knowledge—when coupled with action—can bring about true ecological and social transformation.

5. Conclusion

Where the Crawdads Sing transcends the boundaries of a simple coming-of-age story or murder mystery. It is a profound exploration of the emotional dynamics that underpin our relationship with the natural world. Through the contrasting ecological emotions of Kya and the people of Barkley Cove, the novel illustrates the costs of both connection and disconnection. Kya Clark's life, grounded in biophilia and culminating in eutierria, offers a model of ecological identity. It demonstrates how deep emotional bonds with nature can foster resilience, empathy, and a robust land ethic—while the ecophobia of Barkley Cove exposes the social and environmental costs of fear, prejudice, and anthropocentric arrogance.

However, the true power of the novel lies in its portrayal of reconciliation. Owens carefully constructs a path toward healing, showing how empathy—sparked by narrative understanding and ecological knowledge—can bridge the deepest divides. By revealing Kya's life and work, the town shifts from seeing the marsh as a "wasteland" to understanding it as a vital ecosystem in need of protection. The novel concludes with the hope that, in an age of environmental crisis, the journey toward sustainability involves not just scientific action but also emotional and ethical transformation—a collective shift from ecophobia to a state of connectedness, care, and reciprocity. Kya's legacy as a writer and protector of the marsh teaches the community—and the reader—that the path toward ecological sustainability requires emotional engagement, empathy, and, above all, the recognition of the intrinsic value of nature. In this way, *Where the Crawdads Sing* offers a crucial "glimmer of hope" [4], reminding us that environmental healing begins with emotional understanding and grows into collective action.

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