Ecological Justice Practices

Jesuit Social Services
Building a Just Society

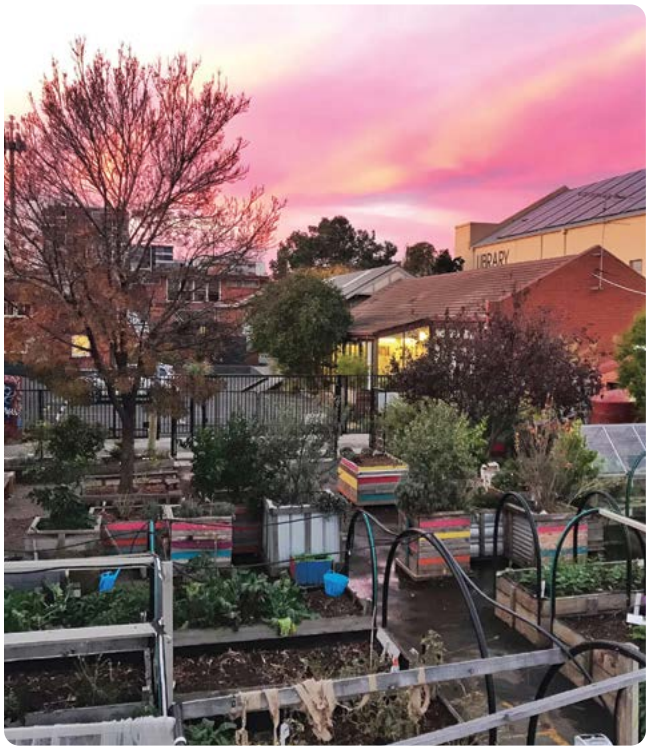
Introduction

At Jesuit Social Services, we conceptualise ecological justice as the intersection between environmental justice and social justice. Ecological justice rests on the principle that "everything is interrelated" and sees individuals, society and the environment as sharing and being reliant on the wellbeing of the same ecosystem.

Ecological justice encompasses social justice, which involves supporting the equitable distribution of wealth, privileges and opportunities in society. However, ecological justice takes this one step further, by seeing how human management of the environment can either enhance equity of individuals and communities, or further entrench inequity, lack of access, and unequal distribution of privilege.

Whilst ecological justice is an expansive concept, and not every aspect will be relevant to your role, you may find that many of the practices in this document are things you already do or have learnt from teammates. Ecological justice may be a new concept, but, at its core, it is about understanding how the current systemic injustices that we see from a social justice perspective are either produced, or amplified, by human engagement with the environment. Even when this resource isn't accessible with a participant, it can be useful to think of each person as their own ecosystem and focus on what allows that ecosystem to flourish. This can be housing, social connectedness, access to foods and health services, employment or cultural lineage, which are elaborated further in separate sections below.

This document is intended to be a tool that supports teams to consider an ecological lens to the wealth of practice wisdom that already exists within and amongst programs and practices at Jesuit Social Services. The ideas below provide a starting point, but teams are encouraged to think creatively about their own cohort of participants, resource access, and hopes for a just society in practice, to develop new ideas and skills that support Jesuit Social Services' commitment to ecological justice.



Housing

Access to stable housing is a key ingredient for a flourishing life. Being able to provide individuals with stable housing through our programs at Jesuit Social Services is important because housing disproportionately impacts people already experiencing inequity. Supporting participants to understand how their housing and well-being are linked to the environment provides information and skills to enhance their own choice and control over their living situation and can foster a sense of control in response to events that remove agency (e.g. Climate-related disasters, systemic discrimination in service accessibility, unexpected life events). Supporting a participant with housing through an ecological justice lens may include considerations around the insulation of the home, practices that reduce energy bills whilst supporting health, or education and advocacy around tenancy.

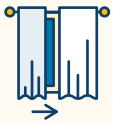
Poorly insulated homes may mean that heating and cooling in the house are overused, which leads to higher energy bills. Being in lower quality housing, due to lower income, and subsequently having higher energy bills can serve to further entrench financial inequity. Some practical tools to support participants include:

House Adjustments

- **Support a participant to consider the insulation on their home.** For example, are windows double-glazed? Are there cracks in the walls or large gaps beneath doors? Are windows able to be opened? Retrofitting homes means modifying a home to make it more environmentally sound, low-cost and better for human health. Retrofitting a house may involve filling gaps around doors and windows, adding a film to windows to help keep warmth in the house, or even simple, self-directed actions such as purchasing curtains to retain heat in rooms. Some councils run programs that assist in the completion of these modifications.
- **Understand the link between energy usage and financial wellbeing.** Support participants to understand the link between how they use items in their home, and how changes in their use can support the goal of financial independence (which in turn supports their health). Some examples include:

Filling a kettle only with the amount of water needed. Filling kettles all the way up when making a cup of tea is unnecessary and leads to higher energy use than just filling kettle with the desired amount.

Washing clothes on a cold wash so water heating is not needed.



Closing doors and curtains when the sun goes down to keep spaces warm.

If participants are renting, working with landlords to implement energy saving household upgrades as part of the Victoria Energy Upgrades for residential properties.

These steps address injustice by highlighting accessible ways to address inequities in housing quality. Lower energy bills may support financial independence and improved money management. Whilst the goal isn't contribution to environmental wellbeing, the use of less energy contributes to lower greenhouse gas emissions.

Tenancy Rights

- **Support participants to know their rights as a tenant and advocate for faults to be repaired.** There are legal requirements around tenancy and housing standards. In situations where landlords are not cooperative, housing unions can support tenants with their legal rights.
- **Support participants to understand the obligation of landlords to them to provide and maintain minimum housing standards for rental properties.** Each state in Australia has minimum standard requirements for rental properties e.g. air ventilation requirements, access to gas and electricity. Additionally, there is information on state government websites about tenants' rights when rentals fail to meet these standards.
- **Ensure participants are aware of housing unions (e.g. RAHU) and Tenants Victoria** and know how and when to contact them.

External environments

- **Support participants to know where the nearest green spaces are to their home and understanding the benefits to well-being by being in nature**. It may be helpful to map routes to local green space with participants, particularly for those who have difficulties with executive function as a result of neurological impairment or mental health diagnoses.
- **Support participants to understand how to manage their physical health if they live in built-up environments, which often have more pollution and less tree cover.** Trees are important for supporting coolness of a suburb, but also for cleaning the air we breathe. Actions like wearing a mask, or choosing alternative walking routes that are not along busy roads, can support this.
- **Consider access of housing to public transport and support participants to map routes** to their most important places.

Extreme weather impacts

Extreme weather is becoming more common and is expected to increase as a consequence of global warming. Impacts can include heatwaves, grassfires, flash flooding, extreme cold, and high winds. Increasingly, extreme weather is becoming common in urban areas and the hardest hit are often communities on the fringes of urban-rural areas.

Make plans with participants for high heat days. Participants may be sleeping rough, not able to afford air conditioning, or not have access to it, which should be accounted for when discussing safety plans for extreme weather.

Ensure participants understand the impact of getting too hot on their health and wellbeing. Heat kills more people than bushfires do, and it's important to be aware that increasingly hot days pose more health risks to communities that already are at risk, leading to more days of work missed and greater financial impact.

- Encourage participants to go to cool spaces on high heat days that they can easily access. For example, the nearest shopping centre, local library, local pool, a park with lots of trees, the cinema. Services can support with this by getting pool passes and cinema passes.
- Support participants to understand the impact of high heat on children or animals that they might care for and recognising the signs of heatstroke in themselves, and in animals and children in their care.

Explore if a participant's local council has a map of free water access points. City of Melbourne does, for example: https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/drinking-fountains-com.doc

Make plans with participants for very cold days, including awareness of public spaces that have heating (e.g. libraries) or of community houses that do warm meals (many do warm breakfasts a day a week and include a hot beverage).

Check with participants if they live in a bushfire-prone area, what their bushfire plan is and support participants to develop one if they do not already have one in place. Local councils will have information on this, staff can support participants to access this information and understand the importance of this.

Consider the impact of power outages on participant wellbeing, especially if they use any devices for daily care that require charging, such as electronically powered mobility aids and assistive technology.

Working with participants who use substances

Ensure participants understand the impact of days of high heat on any medications or substances they use. Create a harm minimisation plan explaining how to stay hydrated when engaging in drug use. For example, it is extremely common for people using crystal meth to forget to drink water and become dehydrated. Meth increases your body temperature and makes the body produce more sweat, so the impact of high heat days on meth use should be considered and discussed with participants. Strategies to minimise a substance user's risk:

- Put a bright sticker on a participant's water bottle to remind them to drink fluids whilst using drugs on high heat days.
- Encourage participants to check the weather prior to using and consider using drugs less on days of high heat when there is a risk of body temperature exceeding the safe threshold of 38° celsius.
- Support participants to consider the space where they are using drugs. For example, if it is a hot day, are they able to access somewhere cool or make their space cooler (e.g. by covering windows)? If it is a cold day, where can they go to get warm?
- Ensure participants understand the impact of the substances they use. Check in with what participants know about the drugs they use and what steps they already have in place to stay safe.

Working with participants with mental health conditions

- Many symptoms associated with mental health diagnoses can be exacerbated by high heat days. Flashbacks, psychosis, aggression, and depression have all been known to worsen on high heat days. Support participants with strategies to stay cool and to activate mental health support plans on days of high heat.
- Climate disasters can impact access to services that support wellbeing. For example, if in-home mental health supports or grocery deliveries are a part of someone's care, how do climate events, such as floods, impact this? If leaving the house is important for someone's well-being and self-management of their mental health, how do climate disasters impact this?
- Climate-related disasters and weather events will lead to an increase in episodes of poor mental health. Staff will have an increasing likelihood of encountering participants who have lived experiences of trauma related to climate events. This may lead to more presentations of PTSD, anxiety and suicidality. Understanding and being empathic to people experiencing climate-related traumas will become increasingly important for program staff.

Team task idea

Brainstorm what resources a team might need to have in order to support participants with extreme heat days or cold weather.

Is this something the team can discuss allocating funds towards? (e.g. contacting local leisure centre for pool passes, having spray bottles for participants to carry around on high heat days, talking to local op shop about receiving donated warm blankets and clothes to give participants?)

Employment

Supporting a participant to access employment within an ecological justice framework might include considering the impact of unpredictable climate events and more extreme weather on employment. Extreme weather can lead to more days of missed work which can result in lower income and an increased experience of poverty.

- For participants interested in performing work outdoors, such as a gardener, roof tiler, or labourer, support the participant to understand their rights at work during extreme heat days, or rights around inability to attend work due to a climate disaster (e.g. floods that block road access).
- Supporting participants to look for options of employment in green energy industries, which are likely to be more secure in providing long term employment and are a growth industry, may lead to more stable employment.
- Support participants to understand the importance of joining their industry union to advocate for how ecological injustices may impact their safety or rights at work. Many unions will allow people to be a non-fee-paying member and still receive union support/benefits.

As with the above example, the goal of this is grounded in supporting people to experience economic participation, sustain housing and community engagement, have access to learning opportunities, support a sense of self-esteem and achievement, and reduce recidivism. The goal in mind isn't ecological justice, but reflects how a deeper understanding of ecological considerations on participants' goals and program outcomes have the potential to support better outcomes in the long term, thus supporting greater social justice. Considering how the injustices of the current and future state of the environment have the potential to undo the social justice work we are doing is vital if we want to support participants to have access to long-lasting change that can weather the unpredictability of the future.

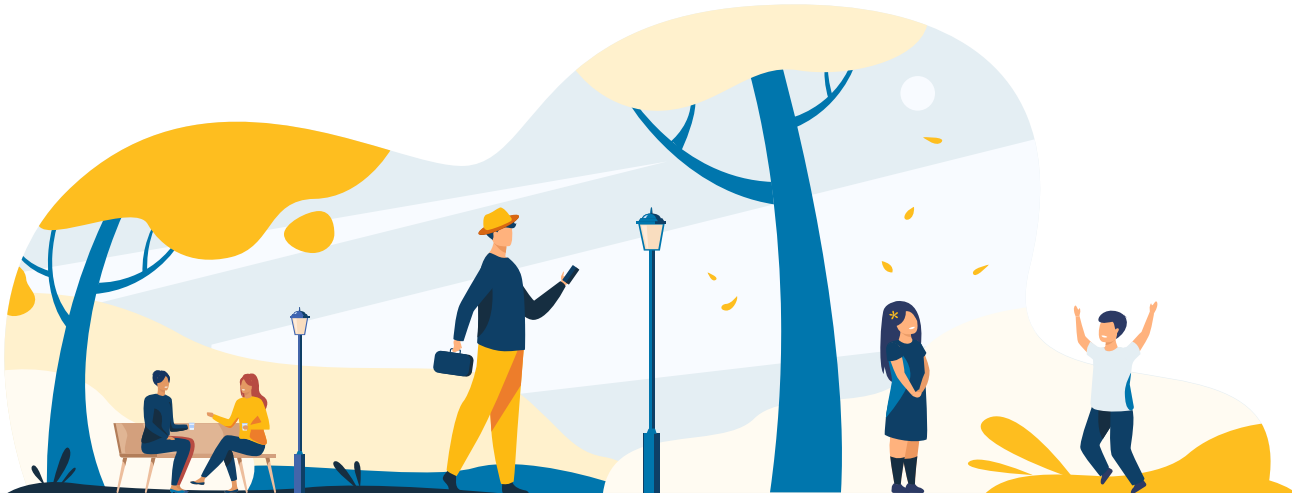
Nature as a therapeutic modality

Utilise nature as a therapeutic modality for engaging with participants. A large body of evidence exists showing that nature slows down the nervous system. If we think about our participants' nervous systems, as they navigate building a new life around them and facing challenges and the impact of their behaviour and what has happened to them, we might recognise they are often experiencing a high stress response. Being out in nature has been shown to dramatically reduce the production of the stress hormone cortisol in the body, and to boost serotonin and dopamine (responsible for feelings of happiness and connection).

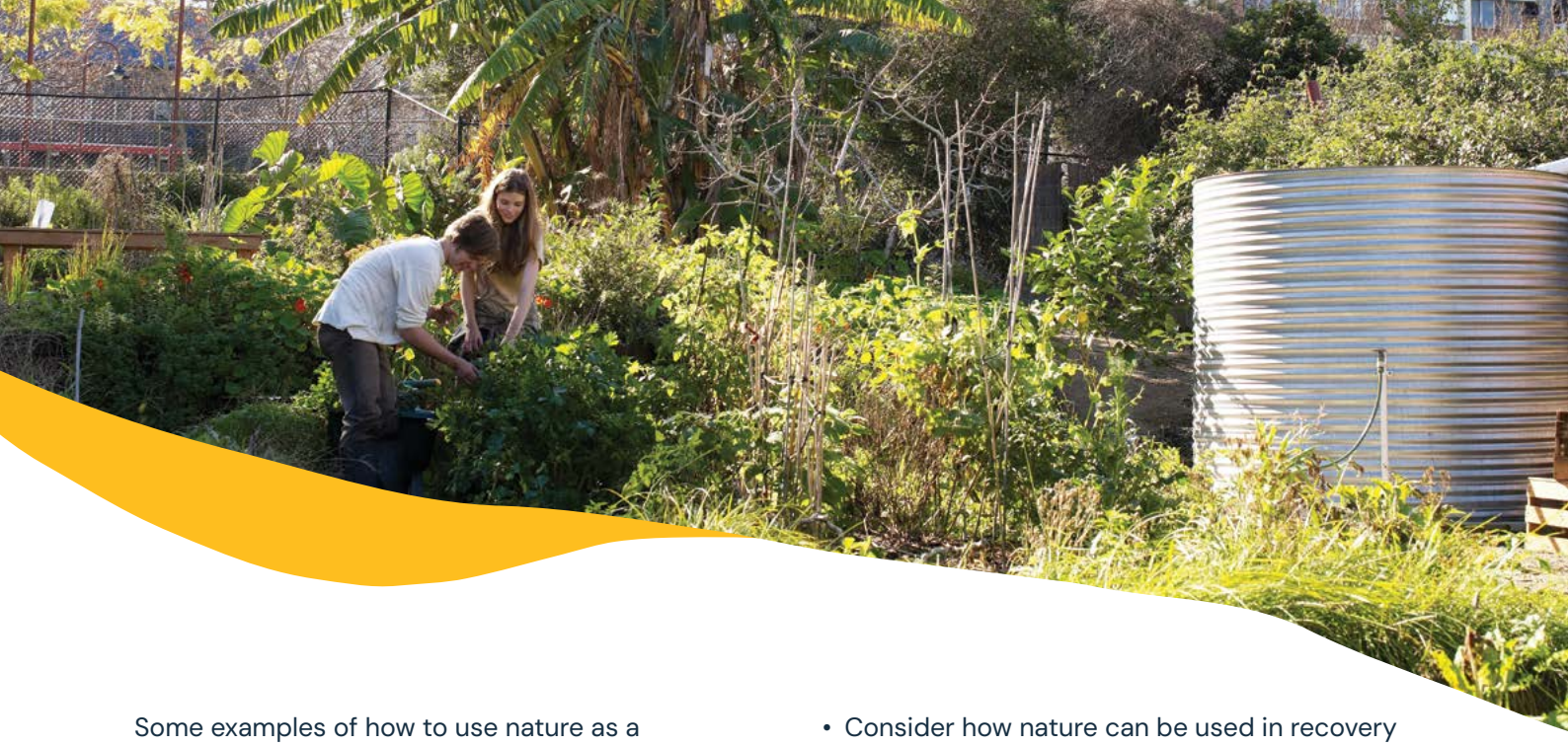
Taking participants out to a green space after a particularly challenging appointment, dysregulating event or action/activity that may be related to a goal that also caused them anxiety could be a great way to support emotional regulation. Allowing people to ground through presence with a natural space, even briefly, can have a profound impact of regulation. It can also help participants connect to their own capacity for self-regulation or co-regulation with nature.

Incorporating walks in green spaces or near blue spaces (like rivers or the oceans) can increase happiness and presence. It may also support openness if conducting an appointment whilst being more present in one's own body in an open space.

Nature has been shown to be beneficial for problem-solving. Being out in nature is correlated with being able to access perspectives on problems that one could not access before. It has also been shown to restore capacity to pay attention and be present. It might be particularly helpful to utilise nature as a therapeutic outreach tool when a participant is struggling with a big decision or feeling overwhelmed and stuck with something in their life. Walking through a green space combines the benefits of exercise with those of nature, both of which have been shown to be beneficial for decreasing anxiety and improving problem solving.



Time spent in nature also increases feelings of connectedness to something larger than oneself, so it can be a useful tool for managing feelings of social isolation.



Some examples of how to use nature as a therapeutic modality include:

- Walk in a local green space. Walking can be a helpful way of conducting sessions as it often involves less eye contact than sitting across from someone.
- If high energy or feelings of frustration are something that a participant struggles with, consider football, soccer, or basketball in a park as a way to use some of that energy whilst also being in an outdoor environment.
- Five senses grounding practice conducted outside as a way to support regulation (5 things you can see, 4 you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell, 1 you can taste).
- Lie on the earth and breathe.
- Create a nature mandala with things you can find in a park.
- Consider how nature can be used in recovery plans. For example, can mapping a local area with someone help them with feeling more confidence navigating activities alone or even to support someone with understanding triggers to engage in a behaviour they're trying to change?
- If you know of access to a local community garden or vegetable growing space, therapeutic gardening is becoming more recognised as a supportive activity for well-being. Not only does it support skill development, but watching a plant you've planted successfully grow supports confidence building which can translate to other areas of capacity building.
- Sometimes, just having a spot in nature that feels familiar to someone can be enough to support regulation and a feeling of calm.

Team task idea

Mapping local green spaces

Teams may want to take some time making a map of the green spaces in their local area or areas where most of their participants are located. This can be good to know in case a participant agrees to an outdoor meeting, or it is decided to use nature as a grounding tool following a challenging engagement.

Team task idea

Brainstorm ideas for bringing nature into therapeutic actions with participants

Not all these need to be outdoors, even indoor plants or listening to nature sounds have been associated with many of the same benefits as outdoor time in nature. Do some research on Nature-based Therapeutic Practices and share with the team.

Food

Access to healthy, affordable, sustainable and culturally appropriate foods supports better health outcomes for participants. Access to any food is better than prioritising access to things like fruits and vegetables, and considerations around food security need to be specific and meaningful to the participants' situation in order to be worthwhile. For example, participants may not like to cook and not know how to use fresh fruits and vegetables. Ecological justice in regard to food requires curiosity about what is possible and sustainable for participants, and aligned with their personal values, rather than simply imposing ideas of sustainable food onto them.

- An ecological approach to food security might include supporting participants to access community groups that provide a meal. This increases social connection and ensures access to food. Many community houses also have things like community gardens and regular food programs, including cooking classes.
- Support participants to access local markets as a cheaper alternative to big brand supermarkets.
- Consider access to culturally appropriate foods, as this will also contribute to someone's ability to engage with healthy food. Simply providing access to fresh fruit and vegetables isn't enough if it doesn't consider that someone's cultural upbringing might impact how they engage with those foods. It also promotes ecological justice to be connected to culture, as connectedness to place is intensified in this act.
- If a participant has identified challenges to more sustainable use of food, engaging in conversations that validate their values, whilst also acknowledging the very real (often structural) limitations to accessing food can be a great practice for reducing potential feelings of shame.
- Teams may want to explore where foods (that are appropriate for the participants) are readily available in their area. For example, are there community grocers that usually offer very low-cost fruit and veg? Examples include: https://www.thecommunitygrocer.com.au/), food recovery stalls (such as Oz Harvest), and linking participants to free hot meals in their local area.

Team task idea

Making a list of readily available food in local area

Teams may want to take some time to make a list of community grocers, recovery stalls and free hot meals available in their local area or areas where most of their participants are located. This is helpful to have available for quick reference. A map may also be useful when supporting participants to think about where they can go to access affordable food.

Connectedness to earth/healing relationships

Ecological justice includes understanding not only what the environment can give us, but a broader understanding of human embeddedness in the natural world. This is often the part of ecological justice that people feel is less relevant to their work with participants. However, when we consider supporting people towards recovery with an understanding that they belong to something bigger than themselves, we are taking an ecological approach. Mostly, this involves supporting a web of healthy relationships around an individual, helping them to be connected to community and to a sense of purpose.

Some things to consider:

- Using nature as a therapeutic tool to promote feelings of connectedness and belonging to something larger than self. This may simply be through walks or can also be through guided nature-based activities. It also may be developed through conversations with a participant whilst outdoors about what is around that they can see and are curious about.
- Time out of the home, whether walking around the neighbourhood or spending time in a local park, can increase the likelihood of meeting neighbours and perhaps build up gentle connections as faces become more familiar.
- Support participants to be involved in local community activities if appropriate. There are a range of options including:

- Explore important relationships with participants, including family, friends, people who've helped them through tough times and perhaps also relationships to place.
- Explore how culture and land may be connected for certain participants:
  - Acknowledging the link between culture and connection to Country for First Nations folks in Australia. Also the ongoing impact of colonisation on wellbeing and embodied trauma, particularly for those who have been forcibly removed from families and their mob's Country.
  - Exploring impact of leaving one's homeland for refugees, asylum seekers and newly arrived migrants. Get curious about how place and culture are linked together, the impact of that link being severed, and how to heal that link in a new place.
  - Opening up conversations with participants about how land and culture might be linked for them. This may include how celebrations/festivals/traditions are connected with land/seasons/a specific location. These conversations can be eye-opening for both participants and practitioners and can be had with participants of all cultural backgrounds without assuming that "culture" is something which exists in non-Anglo ethnic communities. All ethnicities have culture, and that culture can also go deeper than ethnicity, to specific localities and areas.
  - Consider how climate change may change, destroy, or disappear lands that participants once called home or that are strongly attached to their culture (this includes First Nations folks and refugees/asylum seekers, but will increasingly include Australians from settler heritage, particularly those from rural/regional areas). Consider possible impacts on emotional wellbeing and create space for grief around loss of land (You don't need to have answers for this, sometimes making space for the discussion is enough. Resources for supporting climate grief can be shared on request).
- Relational healing practices that already occur at Jesuit Social Services, such as Group Conferencing, can also include ecological elements. Firstly, this practice is ecological in nature due to the practice of relational healing. However, staff at the organisation have explored what the impact of grounding outside before conferencing, or even everyone meeting outside before formal process begins, can have on the process. Some teams are exploring Group Conferencing with First Nations communities and considering outdoor settings for the process.

Team task idea

Practice thinking of people as ecosystems

Perhaps, you could start with yourself. Think about what helps you to flourish in your environment and what impedes your flourishing. Consider drawing or writing about your personal ecosystem. In current land restoration movements, focus has shifted onto amplifying the things an environment needs rather than simply removing what is bad, as more beneficial and nourishing things mean less space for what is harming the environment. How does this approach feel when you think of applying it to yourself or to a participant? Is this an activity you could do with them to help them envision their own ecosystem?

Your own ideas...

Feel free to expand and grow this list to incorporate practices that you have learnt through employing your skills as a practitioner. You may find ways of embodying ecological justice that are new to everyone in your team. Sharing what we learn helps everyone develop a better understanding of what ecological justice in practice with participants looks like.