

Dowsing as a Landscape Practice

RESEARCH SUMMARY

NOVEMBER 2023



What is dowsing?

Dowsing is the practice of using tools such as bent rods, a pendulum, forked sticks, or one's body to receive answers to yes and no questions. In response to a question, the tool will move in one direction or another, signaling a yes or no response. Dowsing is known as a traditional way to locate water sources. However, dowsing is used for a variety of other applications including locating lost objects and people, gardening, diagnosing health conditions, communicating with non-humans, and finding oil and minerals. It is a means of actively engaging with places outside of typical human communication methods.

Why study dowsing?

Those concerned with environmental degradation, the impacts of climate change and building ecologically-just futures often say that humans, especially people from Western-based societies, must **learn to collaborate with nature and fit within ecological systems.** Yet, there is little guidance on *how* to do this. Dowsers offer a method of communication with non-human others. Dowsers also offer perspectives on the ethics involved in negotiating human action with animals, plants, and places. **The study of dowsing provides a view of alternative geographies of knowing and living with "nature."**

Research Questions

How do individuals use dowsing to engage with places and non-humans?

What can we learn from dowsers about engaging with non-human nature?

Research Team and Funding

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A team of University of Vermont undergraduate students assisted with interview transcription and analysis.

The study was funded by an Oaklawn Foundation Faculty Research Grant.



The University of Vermont

Research Methods

This research was conducted over a three-year period from 2018-2021 in locations in the United States and the United Kingdom. We conducted in-depth interviews with fourteen dowzers, some of them multiple times. We used the snowball method for developing contacts; interviewees suggested names of other dowzers. We also employed participant observation methods at several dowsing workshops in our home state of Vermont to learn how dowsing is taught and for what applications it is used. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were coded by hand to identify key themes. The research was approved by the University of Vermont's Institutional Research Board.

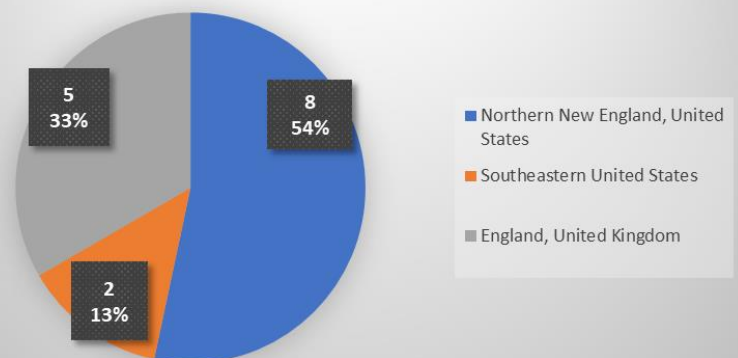


Larry demonstrates using dowsing rods, southern Vermont

Research Participants

The participants included eight men and six women, all presenting as white, who came from diverse working backgrounds. Many held advanced degrees in fields such as agriculture, social sciences, and medicine. Some participants make a living from dowsing and others casually dowsed for themselves or friends. All participant and specific place names used in this report and elsewhere are pseudonyms to protect participants' identities.

Dowsing Research Participants by Home Location



Scholarly Publication

In March of 2023, the first article from this research appeared in the journal *Environmental Humanities*. The article, titled "Sense and Consent in Cocreating with Earth Others," focuses on showing how and why dowzers seek permission from "earth others" before engaging in co-creative activities. Many of our respondents referred to this as "The Protocol" (Can I? May I? Should I?). This article is freely accessible via this [link](#).

Morehouse, H., & C. Morse. 2023. **Sense and Consent in Cocreating with Earth Others**. *Environmental Humanities*, 15(1), 44-63. doi:10.1215/22011919-10216151 %J Environmental Humanities

Research Findings

Dowsing is a **practical skill** that can lead to desired outcomes in landscape interactions.

Dowsers hold a **diverse set of philosophies and practices**.

Nearly all dowsers follow an **ethical protocol**. This protocol suggests **ways that humans can collaborate with non-humans** in environmental decision-making.

Dowsing is a Practical Skill that can lead to desired outcomes in landscape interactions

Research participants report that dowsing allows for communication between the dowser and lost, missing, or invisible objects, energies, resources, people, and non-humans. Dowsers shared stories of finding lost tractor parts, buried utility lines, and underground water sources, **showing the practical applications for this affordable tool**. Dowsing is therefore used in a number of places: farms, ranches, gardens, construction sites, wilderness areas, military bases, and homes. Colin's story, below, illustrates the pragmatic uses of dowsing in work environments.

The majority of the research participants we interviewed also use dowsing as a means to hold communications with non-humans such as animals, plants, rocks, buildings, human bodies, and larger landscapes. Dowsers shared accounts of solving garden pest problems, addressing human health concerns, and increasing water supplies on ranches. They do this by asking questions and receiving answers through the tools they use.

All of the dowsers we interviewed were quick to point out that the specific tool they use is not important. All research participants stated that the dowsing tool used is not important; it is **the human ability to receive a response** that is at work in dowsing. Several dowsers said that they no longer need a tool other than their own bodies to receive a response to their question. As Trish explains, after dowsing for many years on her farm, she receives answers to her questions through physical sensations.

"My neighbor was operating a digger in my front garden at my request to check out the bank... and he ripped out the tele-communications cable. He swore and said 'I should have dowsed for that.' I didn't know what he was talking about. He went back, got his rods, walked across the cable and the rods went off, and then he asked 'are there anymore utilities here?' and he got a 'yep,' the rods went off again. Which is a good job he did because another foot down there was a main water pipe." Colin, from SW England, describing his first exposure to dowsing.

"When I get a 'yes' I feel it in my heart and I feel it come up through the throat. If it's a really powerful 'yes' I can get really teary eyed or emotionally verklempt. . . . All of a sudden my voice starts to quiver. If I feel a 'no,' and it's a really strong 'no,' I'm going to feel it in my gut and can feel almost nauseous." Trish, a Vermont-based dowser

Dowsers hold a **diverse set of philosophies and beliefs** related to dowsing.

"The dowsers we interviewed came from different religious backgrounds. While we found a common set of practices associated with dowsing, we did not uncover a unifying belief system. Many did not mention any religious belief. Yet most seemed to share an understanding that dowsing fosters intimate relations with nonhumans. They also shared a common ethical framework for best practices in dowsing." Morehouse & Morse, 2023

Our research participants did not share in common religious backgrounds or beliefs. Among the dowsers were Christians, Pagans, Druids, spiritually oriented but non-church goers. Some dowsers told us that they don't understand how dowsing works, but it is effective and that is all they need to know. The majority of dowsers we interviewed, including all of the dowsers who work professionally, expressed the belief that **non-human beings—including inanimate beings like rocks and buildings—have a form of intelligence** with which one can communicate.

Learning to Dowse

The participants generally fell into three categories:

1. those who were taught by a **family member** to dowse;
2. those who learned by attending **workshops** offered by individuals or a dowsing organization;
3. and those who were exposed to dowsing through their **work**, such as in construction, the military, and journalism.

A few, like Julia, learned to dowse as children, but the majority learned as adults.

Dowsers reported that they need to feel grounded, playful, or light-hearted in order for their dowsing to work. As Jane explained, she needs to have a child-like mindset to do her clearest dowsing.

"In 1985 I was asked by a magazine to attend the National Convention of the American Society of Dowsers and they gave me a press pass and I attended the convention and also I attended the two-day basic dowsing school... And now I've been 34 years as a dowser."

Jim, from Vermont

"My very first go at dowsing was when I was probably about 11 or 12 so, late 1970s, with my Dad. I've got one older brother and my Dad had known about these kinds of things and decided, let's have a go at dowsing in the garden with a forked stick."

Julia, who grew up in rural England

"... I have to drop away all my notions of what's possible, all that schoolteacher-minister-parents, what should be. I see something that I want to see happening and I go "Oh, let's...!" It's really that child-like wonder. Unless I've put a limit on it there's really no limit. It's just this curiosity, openness. I don't know what's possible. And if I put a lid on it then that's not possible."

Jane, a dowser living in the American South

Nearly all dowsers follow **an ethical protocol**. This protocol suggests **ways that humans can collaborate with non-humans** in environmental decision-making.

The majority of dowsers we interviewed told us that they always ask a specific series of questions before they begin any dowsing project. Many refer to this as **“The Protocol.”** If dowsers receive a “no” to any of the questions, they stop dowsing, as Julia, a UK-based dowser told us:

“So I ask: **‘Can I? May I? Should I?’** I always ask, ‘Is it for the highest good of all concerned, is it safe for all concerned, is it timely, and is it appropriate?’ And there may be other checks that I do with different things, but basically if you’re told ‘No,’ don’t go dowsing.”

Jane, a professional dowser, said that she has ceased doing paid projects when she received a no answer, and Gerald, another professional dowser, explained how he might negotiate with non-humans to arrive at a mutually agreeable situation.

The practice of asking for consent from non-humans, other humans, and even oneself offers a window into how respectful collaboration can occur. The Protocol rests on a belief in the intrinsic value of others, and a respect for their wisdom and sovereignty. Those seeking to create more livable human-ecological networks often say that humans must learn to live with non-humans, but few explain how this can be done. The view that human experts know how to live within ecological and ethical limits presumes that humans alone are the holders of intelligence. Dowsers demonstrate that asking questions of others through non-human language may open a two-way dialogue. It is a humble approach.

What might the practice of asking for consent offer to non-dowsers, even people who are skeptical of dowsing?

This research suggests that non-dowsers may glean important environmental information simply by noticing the sounds, smells, temperature, seasonal changes, and non-human interactions occurring in a place. Taking account of the many expressions of life within a place may be a first step in understanding the limits and possibilities of any human project. At the very least, **pausing to take in the specifics of a landscape may encourage the practice of becoming fully present to who and what surrounds us.**

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Geography and Geosciences faculty at the University of Vermont for their support of this project, and specifically to the Oaklawn Foundation for their investment in faculty research. Thank you to attendees at the 2019 Rural Quadrennial 2019 and the 2021 American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting for offering us feedback on our emerging ideas. We appreciate the many students who served as research assistants over the course of the project.

We are grateful to the inspiring group of dowsers who generously shared their craft, life experiences, and time with us.