Human-Nature Relationships: Navigating a Privileged White Landscape

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Abstract

It can be tempting to think of experiences in 'nature', and building 'human-nature' relationships, as relatively politically neutral, or even straightforwardly beneficial. In this chapter we point out a danger in this approach. We take account of the present rise of the far-right and ecofascism to offer a brief critical material overview of some of the political positions which have informed the birth of some key terms in Western environmental thinking - including ecology, ecosystems, and holism. Further to this, we discuss the re-emergence of fascist ecologies and highlight the fine line between simplistic, dualistically-informed, environmental advocacy and racist and bigoted misanthropy. We suggest that tackling environmental problems is more challenging than building connections or relationships with a perceived 'nature' and that outdoor and environmental educators need to remain ever vigilant of the political ramifications of the knowledges of 'nature' which inform their pedagogies.

Keywords

Human-nature relationships, nature, ecology, ecosystems, holism, social ecology, ecofascism.

Introduction

It may be easy to think that the word 'nature' in 'human-nature' relationships is a relatively neutral one. However, as humans are the ones who discuss 'nature' - describe how it should be related to, and in effect create different versions of it to their own ends - 'nature' can be seen for what it is: highly malleable, political, effecting, and culturally constructed. This is particularly important given the increasing influence the far-right has on environmental discourses (Lubarda, 2020) and the way in which the far-right invokes environmental discourses to their ends. We encourage outdoor and environmental educators to be aware of the potential implications of what might otherwise be thought of as relatively neutral or even beneficial ideas and pedagogies.

A 'human-nature relationship' is never a straightforward technical or pedagogical matter but also always a conceptual or philosophical one *with political and physical implications*. That is to say, with the very use of terms such as 'human-nature relationship', 'connection to nature', 'nature connection', and 'nature connectedness' no straightforward interpretation of meaning exists (although the cultural milieu which promotes these terms do seem to generally mean the same vague thing). Therefore, these terms must be read within the context they are used to decipher the philosophical assumptions they necessarily include. Within the outdoor and environmental education (OEE) literature, positions on these relationships can contradict themselves or go unstated, thereby enacting hegemonic and normative points-of-view. This being said, our intention here is not to review the diversity of approaches to human-nature relationships within OEE discourses. We will not focus here on the traditional and contemporary environmental perspectives which often appear in OEE, such as anthropocentrism, biocentrism, ecocentrism, shallow ecology, deep ecology, feminist, poststructural, indigenous, new materialist, and posthuman perspectives, even though these concepts are implicated in our thinking. These concepts are discussed in *Chapter 4: Worldviews, environments and education* and we recommend you read that chapter before this one. We do, however, urge readers to consider which of these positions might be informing what they are reading and also to seek out alternative renderings (for instance, see Mcphie and Clarke, 2018).

What we offer here is a series of expanded glossary entries designed to remind and provoke the reader of the implications of thinking without theories or concepts from more equitable positions or even heritage. Historicised and implicit cultural bias needs constant disruption in order to break inequitable habits. We believe there may also be overlap with some other chapters of this book, particularly with chapters on decolonial approaches and social justice. This is rectitudinous, because in our view environmental and social justice *need* to be central to the aims of OEE. Our approach, therefore, is to take account of the issues of effects or performative inequities produced by particular invented environmental concepts, such as nature, ecology, holism and ecosystems, due to their usage in OEE. Space precludes a detailed surveyance, so we offer a brief and critical history of some key terms, followed by a short discussion on the present moment and inequitable landscapes, and urge the reader to continue reading on these topics.

Problematic foundations of ecological thinking

As we have indicated, there are very different ideas about what 'human-nature relationship' means, and different ideas have different effects. Noel Castree (2005) writes that there exist competing ideas, or knowledges, about nature - competing *ecologies*. For Castree, these 'knowledges' are complex enmeshments of cognitive, moral, and aesthetic beliefs which have historical antecedents and concrete effects:

> Knowledges of nature are multiple in their origins, their meanings, their referents and their audiences. Together, they materially shape understandings of, attitudes towards, and practices upon those numerous things we describe as natural things. In short, the contest whereby certain knowledges of nature gain purchase in any society (or some part thereof), while others are marginalised, is a high-stakes one. (Castree, 2005, p.18)

Environmental historians have pointed to material effects to demonstrate the ways in which our ecologies (ideas about, or knowledges of, what it means to count as 'natural') have performed equitably or inequitably. If we dig deep, we start to unearth some surprising material considering the foundations of concepts such as 'ecology' itself, as well as 'holism' and 'ecosystems', terms often used in the rhetoric of OEE. Below, we offer some potentially problematic origins of these concepts and go on to explore the idea of fascist ecologies.

Ecology

Ecology is often defined as the study of relationships and interactions between 'living' organisms and 'their' environments, including between humans and so-called 'nature'. Already, we can spot problems with this definition, concerning what is considered 'living' (which culture's definitions are used over and above another's?), positioning hierarchical 'subjects' in a power relation to what might be considered a mere backdrop ('their' environments), and separating humans from a romanticised version of 'nature'.

In perhaps one of the earliest examples of modern ecological thought, in 1815 Ernst Moritz Arndt stated, "When one sees nature in a necessary connectedness and interrelationship, then all things are equally important - shrub, worm, plant, human, stone, nothing first or last, but all one single unity" (Arndt, 1815, n.p., cited in Staudenmaier, 2011, p.16). Arndt was a lover of romanticised rural landscapes and agrarian cultures, whose xenophobic nationalism led to his belief in an inseparable identity of racial purity and a reconnection to nature (Staudenmaier, 2011). This belief in a xenophobic racial purity emerging from a romanticisation of landscapes/nature/environments can be linked directly to particular moments/movements in history, such as nationalistic idealisations born out of the Roman scholar Tacitus' descriptions of Germanic tribes as pure-blooded indigenous forest peoples, "a race unmixed by intermarriage with other races" (Tacitus, cited in Schama, 2004, p. 82) and the development of the Romantic Sublime in Germany and England. We may equally ask how modern aspirations to sustainability seek environmental amelioration whilst perhaps blindly retaining various social injustices.

We see similar politics reflected in the birth of the word 'ecology'. Ecology appears in OEE as a term used for the scientific study of the 'natural world' and as an educational aim, for instance in promoting 'ecological literacy'. Ernst Haeckel coined the term 'ecology' in 1866. Haeckel's racially and specially hierarchical concept of ecology was fascistic. The very idea of ecology, including the formation of the sound of it from its Greek roots, *oikos* (meaning home), is problematic from an equitable positioning due to the manner in which it establishes a hierarchy as ontologically 'true' - between humans and other-than-humans, for example. It continues to perform hierarchically in many international curriculums. For example, through Linnaeus' taxonomy of species, humans are conceived as on top of the tree of life, even though we are assembled from/of many species conceived of as at the bottom of the tree, such as bacteria, viruses, mites, fungi etc. (water or minerals aren't even considered in this rather limited version of 'life'). During the many tumultuous global events of 2020, biological conceptions within ecological hierarchies – such as white men being biologically superior - have been called out through movements, such as BLM and #MeToo, with calls to

update the patriarchal white history of pedagogical curriculums, replacing them with more equitable and inclusive narratives.

Holism

Holism appears in OEE with calls to understand the environment more 'holistically', or when proponents claim that the 'whole is greater than the sum of its parts', which are intimately interconnected. Although holism has ancient origins in varied guises, it was a term (re)invented in 1926 by Field Marshall Jan Smuts, a vocal advocate of apartheid, who devised the term holism to support his theory that nature would find its own stability, once wholes were formed, as long as all the 'wholes' were in their correct places (Curtis, 2011). This stability was, of course, one that fitted neatly around his vision of white supremacy and a world stabilised by the order of the British Empire, a view that was challenged by Arthur Tansley, the inventor of the term 'ecosystems' (see below).

Holism has been used (and abused) for many different purposes but can be seen performing inequitably (still) in Apollonian ideals of humanism, wholesomeness, and purity. These ideals can lead to experiences of racism and victim blaming. For example, holistic approaches to therapy, such as positive psychology and the alternative health industry, have utilised the concept of holistic living in order to project fantasies of wholeness, happiness and positive thinking that can "weigh on a cancer patient like a second disease":

> I know I have to be positive all the time and that is the only way to cope with cancer-but it's so hard to do. I know that if I get sad, or scared or upset, I am making my tumor grow faster and I will have shortened my life. (from Holland's *The Tyranny of Positive Thinking*, cited in Ehrenreich, 2009, p. 43).

Ehrenreich (2009) challenges this wholesome state of mind as "perhaps more accessible to those who are affluent, who conform to social norms, who suppress judgement in the service of faith, and who are not overly bothered by societal injustice" (p. 169, emphasis added). In this way, holism and associated contextual concepts, such as happiness, may privilege "hegemonic groups who have access to what makes us believe we are happy" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 2).

Ecosystems

Tansley's theory[1] of ecosystems, suggesting a law of equilibrium, posited nature to be a self-regulating system that desired stability. Of course, since then, the field of ecology has ostensibly moved on (although humans or human produce is often omitted), recognising that dynamic change is anything but stable. However, many romanticised views of nature still integrate a harmonious Edenic version of self-regulation and stability. Cohen (2013) suggests there is a "utopian emphasis on homeostasis, order, and the implicit benevolence of an unexamined force labelled nature" (p. xxii), "a purified place to which one travels rather than dwells always within: separate from the human, empty, foundationally pure" (p. xxi). This version of nature is sold as "affirmative, extraverted and masculine […] sunny, straightforward, ableist, holistic, hearty, and 'healthy'" (Morton, 2010, p. 16).

These concepts – ecology, holism, ecosystems – all play a role in promoting a particular vision of 'human-nature' relationships and as such, can influence pedagogy, as

[1] The idea of which came to him in a dream.

well as everyday behaviour, via implicit bias. As such, we could further a critical discussion of the present, and perspectives such as deep ecology[2], with the controversial addition of fascist ecology, sometimes known as 'ecofascism' or 'eco-xenophobia'.

Performative implications for the present

Whilst our brief survey of the problematic origins of ecological thinking may seem anachronistic and removed from the present-day concerns of OEE, we believe outdoor and environmental educators should be aware of the fine line between promotion of environmental concern and nationalism, (including anti-population and bigoted perspectives) implied by some knowledges of nature given the present rise in far-right hate. Although there may be positive attributes to, for instance, a deep ecological worldview when compared to, say, shallow ecology, the implicit dangers of such a view can also strengthen a far-right position, regardless of whether its originators meant well. This is particularly the case given the current moment, when the alt or far-right "deploys ecological discourse, rediscovering older Nazi themes like organic agriculture and animal rights whilst articulating novel right-wing interpretations of concepts like biodiversity, decentralism, deep ecology, bioregionalism, anti-capitalism, Indigenism, and anarchism" (Taylor, 2019, p. 276).

The rise of fascist ecologies

White supremacists have versions of nature that often distort Darwinian theorisations in order to raise their own idealised positions of power. Many nature writers also fit into this category (see Smyth, 2019, for examples). In the UK, *Tarka the Otter*'s author, Henry Williamson famously expressed his fascism through his nature writing. Of course, this fascistic stance does not necessarily mean that people should not share in a 'concern' for environmental degradation. Reddick (2013) points out that the poet Ted Hughes embraced "Williamson's concern about the preservation of the countryside while avoiding the influence of his far-right politics" (p. 353), although we are not certain that this avoidance is possible. The problems start arising when those environmental concerns ostracise, subjugate, or demonise others (humans and other-than-humans). Even deep ecology, one of the more popular proffered solutions to dualistic environmental thinking, can do just this, or at least has the structural foundations and contradictory Cartesian rhetoric to be complicit in this. Deep ecology has been linked to fascism a number of times, sometimes because of the extreme views of some of its proponents (see Bookchin's 1987 critique, for example). Of course, some nature writers, many of whom follow a deep ecological ideology, may be complicit in this white, privileged version of nature, often without fully realising it themselves (via implicit bias) - here we would include most prominent nature writers, from the transcendentalists to the those praised as forging the 'new' nature writing. "Of course they aren't fascists. But when fascism comes along they may not be best-placed to see it for what it is, or to resist the pull of its song" (Smyth, 2019, n.p.). In fact, by its very nature, there can be no 'writing about nature' or 'nature writer' that is not complicit in co-creating inequitable social environments, if that version of nature is a privileged one. And almost all the versions of nature in modern Western literature are privileged versions, mostly written by white, middle-class men. Therefore, it's crucial to push for more calls for writing with other

[2] The biocentric perspective of deep ecology suggests that 'nature' has inherent value rather than merely anthropocentric value alone (economic value, for example). It reminds us that we are also part of 'nature', although has been criticised as being highly romanticised and deeply contradictory when it comes to human produce or technology, which many of its proponents' claim is *not* natural.

versions of nature, by writers who are not white, middle-class, or even heterosexual men (as this implicit lens can lead to heteronormative perceptions of a gendered nature, for example).

As is evident above, varied perceptions of human-nature relationships are *always* heavily politicised. Whilst some socialist orientated thinkers prize urban immigration for its heterogeneity (think Lefebvre or Marx), other conservation-minded National Socialist thinkers (think John Tanton) have historically backed anti-immigration policies for fear of tainting their harmonious *Gardens of Eden*.

Contemporarily, if deep ecologists truly believed that humans were also nature, 'letting nature seek its own balance' would incorporate humans giving aid to other humans as this *is* nature seeking its own balance. Cultural bias can make it easy to blame population growth which is happening 'over there'. The idea that population growth is the *largest* 'elephant in the room' of the environmental crisis - of which we can ethically do something about for near term effect - has been debunked (Bradshaw and Brook, 2014, p. 16614). Viewing population in this way can lead to heinous crimes - expanding consumption is the far greater challenge.

> It was out of this kind of crude eco-brutalism that Hitler, in the name of 'population control,' with a racial orientation, fashioned theories of blood and soil that led to the transport of millions of people to murder camps like Auschwitz. The same eco-brutalism now reappears a half-century later among self-professed deep ecologists who believe that Third World peoples should be permitted to starve to death and that desperate Indian immigrants from Latin America should be exclude by the border cops from the United States lest they burden 'our' ecological resources. (Bookchin, 1987, n.p.)

Whilst the above suggests the type of horrendous implicit bias that we saw in *some* uses of the '#WeAreTheVirus' hashtag, explicit bias is of equal if not greater concern. At the time of writing the far-right environmentalism of ecofascism was being actively linked to responses to the Covid-19 pandemic on influential online message boards such as 4chan and 8chan. These connections often start with attempts at humour which then merge into serious political positions in the wider online community (Morgan, 2020).

Inequitable landscapes

It is becoming more evident that romantically conceived 'green' environments, such as national parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB's), are inherently *white*. 'Parks advocate equal opportunities policies but these are often ineffective' (Ayamba and Rotherham, 2003, p. 1). There is a good deal of evidence (see national park statistics, DEFRA and Natural England) to suggest an inequitable lack of accessibility to these romanticised versions of nature for many people who are not white (Ayamba and Rotherham, 2003) or who are working class (Suckall et al., 2009) to which the press are now becoming more aware. Recent articles and popular TV programmes are catching up with the social sciences, albeit with a limited translation in many cases to help dilute the often-inaccessible language used in academia. For example, on June 28th, 2020, the BBC programme *Countryfile* highlighted some of the issues around being a black person in the English countryside, emphasising how it is seen as a 'white environment' for many people. The lack of epistemological access to these romanticised environments (for many non-white and working-class people) that were particularly emboldened during the 18th Century highlights that these are indeed white (and mostly upper/middle-class) environments for a number of reasons that were/are culturally constructed. For instance, the inequity of 'Walking while Black' is becoming more obvious. 'Walking while black restricts the experience of walking, renders inaccessible the classic Romantic experience of walking alone' (Cadogan, 2016, n.p.). The complexities of historical and intersectional experiences, and advocacy for/of being

black in ‘nature’ are beginning to be explored in novel ways, for instance through the hashtag #blackinnature and through contemporary performances such as *Black Men Walking* (directed by Dawn Walton). However, the experience of achieving a connection to a particular vision of nature through aesthetic experiences within traditional Western OEE remains a hangover from transcendental romanticism. Experience of the Sublime, a culturally constructed embodied aesthetic that embellished the ‘awesome power of nature’ is to be sought within this telling. But for whom? The Picturesque and Romantic periods of the 18th and 19th centuries were driven by wealthy white Europeans and as such limited epistemological access to walking in Sublime landscapes. Poet William Wordsworth knew that the ‘romanticised’ mountains of Cumbria were inaccessible to the working classes and wished to keep them this way. In 1844 in a letter to the press Wordsworth explained “members of the working class would not have the capacity to appreciate the ‘beauty’ and ‘character of seclusion and retirement’ that the Lakes District had to offer [...] it can be produced only by a slow and gradual process of culture” (Wordsworth, cited in Schwartz, n.d., paras. 5-7). What is created here is an elite epistemological (in)accessibility to certain landscapes which is, in turn, an (in)accessibility to an elitist construction of knowledge. Other ecologies may have more luck with producing more equitable actions.

Alternative ecologies: Social Ecology

Social ecology was coined by Murray Bookchin as a democratic alternative to shallow capitalistic ecologies as well as new age ecologies. Bookchin suggested that human induced environmental inequities were a result of social inequities in hierarchical societies. He described “essential differences in outlook between class and preclass societies”, illustrating “the philosophical linkage between the propensities to objectify nature and to objectify one’s fellow human being” (Szasz, 1982, p. 1475). Bookchin offers this significant critique of deep ecology’s lack of appreciation of sociology:

> deep ecology, despite all its social rhetoric, has virtually no real sense that our ecological problems have their ultimate roots in society and in social problems. It preaches a gospel of a kind of ‘original sin’ that accurses a vague species called humanity---as though people of color were equatable with whites, women with men, the Third World with the First, the poor with the rich, and the exploited with their exploiters. Deep ecologists see this vague and undifferentiated humanity essentially as an ugly ‘anthropocentric’ thing---presumably a malignant product of natural evolution---that is "overpopulating" the planet, ‘devouring’ its resources, and destroying its wildlife and the biosphere---as though some vague domain of ‘nature’ stands opposed to a constellation of nonnatural human beings, with their technology, minds, society, etc. (Bookchin, 1987, n.p.)

We think this quote is essential reading for outdoor and environmental educators who hope to promote ‘human-nature relationships’, if only as an antidote to the more popular deep ecological views in OEE discourse. Arguably, social ecology takes into account more equitable human-environment relations than deep ecology does. However, social ecology may be just as fragile as other ecologies given its semantic origins and Bookchin is well known for his overly combative and dogmatic style of persuasion – perhaps not the best tactic when confronting other ‘environmental egos’. Maybe we need to follow philosophers Deleuze and Guattari’s advice more carefully when they continued to use the language of nature-culture dualities, *just for kicks* - only ‘after’ unearthing, deconstructing, and diffracting the inequities that nature bifurcations encourage (Mcphie and Clarke, 2018). Our own preference here is to pay attention to and think *with* feminist, queer, Indigenous, and posthuman ecologies, and especially to listen to those writing from minority perspectives on human-nature relationships.

Post-natural landscapes

In this chapter we have emphasised the grave material effects of various knowledges of nature. Castree (2005) reminds us of this seriousness in the following terms:

> because nature is such an all-pervasive aspect of our collective thought and practice, the way it is understood is manifestly important. Hegemonic ideas about nature are those general understandings of human nature and the non-human world that are more or less 'taken for granted' in any society. These ideas have a history, a geography and a sociology to them. In other words, they begin with someone or some organisation, they then spread across space to influence greater numbers of people, and they reflect in some measure, the agendas of those who promulgate these ideas. (pp. 19-20)

As we continue to see tensions of inequity (for example, racial, economic, North/South, gendered, ableist, colonial, environmental) strain under the combined weight of late global capitalism, climate catastrophe, and economic and health responses to the Coronavirus pandemic, it is apt that outdoor and environmental educators reflect at every level and on every topic on its potential effects within the current political moment. With this chapter we have taken this politically material approach to analysis of the idea of 'human-nature relationships' seriously. We have discussed some of the ways in which nature has been envisioned historically so as to highlight the genealogies of environmental thought from which OEE discourses draw. We do this in order to highlight some politically problematic origins, and also to argue for a move beyond simplistic 'relationship' or 'connection' narratives.

We believe outdoor and environmental educators, as key players in the construction of different knowledges of nature, have a great responsibility to pay attention to the political ramifications of the ecologies present in their pedagogies. Whilst it can be tempting to think of providing experiences in 'nature' as politically neutral or beneficial, in truth certain pedagogies may unwittingly promote biases that have the potential to become warped in learners' future experiences. Further to this, participants bring political ecologies with them to these experiences, understanding nature in different ways, and learn from others whilst engaging in these environments. Experiences in a presumed 'nature' may provide as much illiberal as liberal thought, as much direction for social injustice as social justice. These concepts are inextricably entwined with concepts of nature. So much so that when someone says or writes 'nature', and its synonyms, we should hear and read 'politics'. We suggest that philosophic pedagogical approaches, which attempt to unpack the assumptions and bifurcations we bring to environments as learners and educators, will prove more fruitful in promoting environmental and social justice than seemingly simplistic 'connection' or 'relationship' pedagogies.

If it is possible to turn the tide on mass extinction and climate catastrophe, we must become socially and environmentally inclusive. We must interrogate our own implicit bias, which means deconstructing the very language we use so as to weed out the roots of oppression which are often hidden behind unexamined white privilege. Environmental movements and conservation practices can whitewash open participation through their inequitable linguistic heritage. We urgently need an ontological environmental overhaul in which we include and pay attention to other voices. Therefore, we will leave you with a contentious thought provoked by the title of this book, *Outdoor Environmental Education in Higher Education: International Perspectives* - how many of these 'international perspectives' are authored by non-white non-middle-class Westerners, and what does that *do*?

Reflective Questions

1. What differences would we have seen in modern environmental movements if Greta Thunberg were not white?
2. What do you think of when you think of 'nature'? In your view are some people more natural than others? Why or why not? What are the best objections or challenges to your position? And what are the objections or challenges to those objections and challenges?
3. If 'nature' is not politically neutral or beneficial, how should we frame it in our OEE pedagogies or research?
4. Are there other, more equitable worldviews/ontologies/epistemologies regarding human-nature relationships that might be promoted in our pedagogy and research? If so, can, could and should people from other cultures adopt them without misappropriation or implicit bias? Do we need to find the 'right one', or should we seek pluralism in our worldviews? What are the challenges and opportunities in each approach?
5. How do we discuss environmental issues whilst keeping multiple perspectives in mind? Do we need 'nature' as a term if peoples' understandings of the word are so diverse? Is 'nature' rendered useless?

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