



Nature to place: Rethinking the environmental connectedness perspective



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ABSTRACT

The environmental connectedness perspective posits that direct encounter with generalized, or non-specific “nature,” leads to environmental connectedness and subsequent pro-environmental behavior. This article examines this perspective and proposes a place-based application of the nature encounter–environmental behavior relation. An empirical study using data from a national survey on outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism is presented. Results show a minimal relationship between measures of environmental connectedness and self-reports of environmental behavior. The following examination of the environmental connectedness perspective reveals that environmental connectedness is rooted in a material/objective perspective, neglecting the human domain of perceptions, values, and representations. The environment as “nature” is portrayed as a geographically undefined agent with the inherent power to change human attitudes and behavior. Based on this, the article concludes with a proposed replacement of the elusive concept of nature for the relational concept of *place*.

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1. Introduction

The past 150 years have brought dramatic changes to the world's biosphere, and most of these changes are seemingly anthropogenic (McNeill, 2000). Global warming, contamination of air and water, forest habitat devastation, and reduced biodiversity are all examples of human induced environmental changes. Based on these concerns, one of the most pressing and persisting societal debates of contemporary time regards the causes of, and the proper solutions to environmental degradation. At the core of the debate is societal change in favor of an ecologically sustainable future, including increasing levels of individual environmental concern, i.e. people's awareness of environmental problems and their dedication to take action to counteract these problems.

A recurrent environmental theme in over the past 50 years refers to the importance of individual “nature encounters” and “nature experiences” as pathways to pro-environmental behavior. Examples of this can be found in a variety of academic fields, such as environmental history (e.g. Nash, 1967), psychology (e.g. Roszak, 1992), deep ecology (e.g. Naess, 1993), education (e.g. Hungerford & Volk, 1990), outdoor learning (e.g. Sandell & Öhman, 2013), and

human geography (e.g. Tuan, 1974). This theme is also present in the writings of environmental luminaries such as Henry David Thoreau (e.g. 1854), John Muir (e.g. 1894) and Aldo Leopold (e.g. 1949). Ultimately, despite differences, these efforts all attempt to describe an essential human relationship with the biophysical world related to attitudes and/or an action outcome (a behavior or behavioral intention).

The idea of nature's potential for individual transformation towards higher levels of environmental concern and pro-environmental behavior has recently found a scholarly application in ideas that will here be broadly grouped as the *environmental connectedness perspective*. These ideas of environmental connectedness describe an affective, cognitive, and/or physical human relationship with nature by using terms such as affinity, biophilia, commitment, ecological self, identity, inclusion, relatedness, and sensitivity (Bragg, 1996; Chawla, 1999; Clayton, 2003; Davis, Green, & Reed, 2009; Kals, Schumacher, & Montada, 1999; Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Nisbet, Zeliński, & Murphy, 2009; Palmer, 1993; Schultz, 2001, 2002; Stedman, 2002; Sward & Marcinkowski, 2001; Wilson, 1984). Within this broad grouping the emphasis is on the experience of and direct encounter with generalized, or non-specific, “nature” and the possible emotional and/or cognitive relationship between the individual and nature that develops from these experiences. Essentially, it is hypothesized that spending time in nature will, given repeated experience, help an individual feel

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connected to nature, more inclined to care about nature, and, ultimately, to protect it. [Chawla and Derr \(2012\)](#) encapsulate all elements of this progression when defining sensitivity as

“a predisposition to take an interest in learning about the environment, feeling concern for it, and acting to conserve it, on the basis of formative experiences [in nature]” (p. 19).

Given this proposed pathway from nature experience to pro-environmental behavior, the perspective of environmental connectedness has emerged with growing prevalence. With respect to increasingly assertive calls for more sustainable futures it is therefore of great interest to examine the basis for, and strength of, environmental connectedness. What are the theoretical principles of the perspective? And, what is the validity of the claim that nature experience ultimately results in environmental behavior? This article addresses these questions by adding perspectives derived from human geographical thought. The relationship between humans and their surrounding environment is regarded as a central theme of the geographical discipline, and theoretical efforts are plenty. Accordingly, the article is based on a customary empirical study *and* a review of geographical ideas on human–environmental relationship, all in order to (i) examine the environmental connectedness perspective as construct and (ii) propose potentially more suitable applications of the nature encounter–environmental behavior relation. The modest relationship presented in this study is similar with much of the previous research in this area. It will therefore be argued that environmental connectedness has little to gain by using the notion of non-specific “nature.” We are more inclined to think that any nature encounter should be regarded as experiences situated in particular *places*.

In Sweden, like in most Western countries, many so-called nature related experiences occur in the context of outdoor recreation. Moreover, the importance of nature encounter for increasing levels of environmental concern appears frequently in various promotions for outdoor recreation and outdoor education ([Sandell, Öhman, & Östman, 2005](#); [Sandell & Sörlin, 2008](#)). Indeed the tradition of Scandinavian outdoor recreation, “friluftsliv”, has been described as a particular way of meeting nature, including a sense of connection with nature ([Beery, 2013b](#); [Faarlund, 2007](#); [Faarlund, Dahle, & Jensen, 2007](#); [Sandell & Öhman, 2010](#)). Fittingly, the empirical study presented in this article is based on analysis of survey data regarding public outdoor recreation in Sweden. Data collected in the Swedish national research program Outdoor Recreation in Change ([Fredman, Karlsson, Romild, & Sandell, 2008](#)) include questions of recreation participation, access to nature, environmental connectedness, environmental behavior, and extensive demographics within the context of the nature-based outdoor recreation experience.

1.1. The environmental connectedness perspective

As mentioned above, the ideas that fit within the perspective of environmental connectedness are those that emphasize the experience of, and direct encounter with generalized, or non-specific “nature,” and the possible emotional and/or cognitive relationship between the individual and nature that develops from these experiences. This broad group of connectedness related ideas ranges from how one thinks about oneself (e.g. identity) to how one conceptualizes one's relationship with the more than human world (e.g. affiliation or connection). And while one can argue that there are key differences between these ideas, they share the same hypothesis that spending time in nature will, given repeated experience, help an individual feel part of/connected to/affiliated with nature. This process will eventually lead to this individual being

more inclined to care about nature, and ultimately, to protect it. [Goralnik and Nelson \(2011\)](#), drawing on the work of Aldo Leopold, summarize it as follows:

1. “Our experiences with the environment as our biotic community will prompt an emotional attachment to, and sense of value for, that community.
2. We act to preserve those things we are emotionally attached to and in which we posit value.
3. Thus, we act on behalf of the environment if our experiences with it portray it as a community to which we belong.” (p. 189)

A body of empirical studies explores this possible link. Research supporting the existence of a relationship between connectedness to nature and environmental action or behavior includes, for example: [Gosling and Williams \(2010\)](#), [Kals et al. \(1999\)](#), [Mayer and Frantz \(2004\)](#), [Müller, Kals, and Pansa \(2009\)](#), [Nisbet and Zelenski \(2011\)](#), [Schultz \(2001\)](#). Among these, [Mayer and Frantz \(2004\)](#) present the results of 5 different connectedness to nature (CNS) studies and conclude that, there is a moderately strong positive relationship between the CNS and eco-friendly actions. A recent example of related research (sustainability studies) finds that contact with nature could foster individual happiness and environmentally responsible behavior ([Nisbet & Zelenski, 2011](#)). Specifically, this research concludes that walking outdoors facilitates a sense of nature relatedness and notes that people who feel more nature related are happier and more likely to engage in sustainable behaviors. Nisbet and Zelenski refer to this experience of behavior progression as “a happy path to sustainability” and encourage increased contact with nature as one way to guide people toward more environmentally sustainable behavior. [Kals et al. \(1999\)](#) considered whether nature protective willingness and behavior decisions show a relationship with the connectedness construct of affinity toward nature, interest in nature, and indignation about insufficient nature protection. The results showed that all three items qualify as behavioral predictors, explaining up to 47% of the variance of the criteria ([Kals et al., 1999](#), p. 191). Similarly hopeful findings from [Müller et al. \(2009\)](#) supported their hypothesis that emotional attachment to nature explains an important amount of variance in willingness for pro-environmental commitment.

Despite these encouraging results, caution is urged. For example [Nisbet and Zelenski \(2011\)](#) note that even though the links seem possible yet they need verification. This caution is similar to the conclusion presented by [Mayer and Frantz \(2004\)](#), in conjunction with their positive and significant results, “future research needs to elaborate on whether simply feeling a sense of connectedness to nature in itself leads to eco-friendly acts, or whether feeling connected to nature establishes the necessary condition that makes a request for eco-friendly acts more effective” (p. 514). And while [Kals et al. \(1999\)](#) and [Müller et al. \(2009\)](#) find relationships between affinity toward nature and nature-protective behavior/pro-environmental commitment, ‘commitment’ indicates that they measured willingness to engage in long term intentions to protect nature and the environment. While these results are both useful and hopeful, we urge caution noting that intentional control of behavior may be limited based on results from [Webb & Sheeran's \(2006\)](#) meta-analysis of behavioral intentions and behavior change. Similar to the conclusion of Mayer and Frantz.

[Müller et al. \(2009\)](#) encourage more study into their hopeful results. They promote developmental, longitudinal studies to investigate potential causal relationships to further explore the conditions under which affinity toward nature develops, and motivates behavior. Moreover, this question of behavior motivated on behalf of environmental connectedness or attitudes/values orientation has been explored in related fields of study, such as

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