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Nature, a psychological perspective

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Nature, a psychological perspective. - Henk Staats

What is nature, really? Ultimately, nature encompasses everything we are and are surrounded by, making it a difficult concept to define productively. However, for an understanding of nature from a psychological perspective we can look at a number of cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions that focus on interacting with the perceptual qualities of the @environment that is mostly characterized by inanimate

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matter and organisms, whose creation is essentially not completely dependent on the acts of mankind. This is a broad definition, on purpose, as it clearly includes phenomena that are created or affected by the acts of mankind e.g., cultivated flowers, fields of grain, herds of sheep, and even weather and climatic conditions. This choice stems from the finding that most non-experts tend to include these semi-artificial elements as manifestations of nature. We agree with this, and even from a philosophical standpoint there could be reason to agree. Essentially it is also in line with current ideas on the evolutionary versus cultural origin of preference for nature, stating that man-nature interaction has always been a matter of mutual adaptation in which notions of unspoiled nature, its beauty and importance, are principally culturally and historically determined (Schama, 1995).

The experience of nature is generally contrasted with the experience of built, urban environments. Important is that generally two literatures on human-nature interaction can be distinguished: the 'good' one, focusing on the beneficial qualities of nature, and the 'bad/problematic' one dealing with the negative consequences of man's relationship to nature, concerning pollution, @ climate change, @ biodiversity loss and other ways in which mankind exploits nature in an unsustainable fashion. We will discuss both literatures, to come up with a last section attempting to unify those in a series of concepts that pertain to both.

Beneficial qualities of human-nature interaction.

We follow the conceptual analysis by Wohlwill (1983) who distinguished four qualities of the experience of nature in which natural environments are different from built, artificial environments and lead to higher preferences:

- *Stimulus properties*: in general natural environments are less complex, they show more order, an order that can be easily achieved through the way elements are perceived as coherent and fitting yet may contain intricate details providing more richness. Colors are generally less bright and more alike. Sounds are less loud, and more predictable. Movement is less abrupt, and speed is lower. Overall, this makes for a stimulus environment that has lower complexity which is generally considered pleasant, more so than urban environments devoid of natural elements.

- *Growth and change*: the autonomous processes of growth and change, inherent in natural environments arouse curiosity and fascination, and even awe. Realizing that human influence on these processes is unnecessary, limited, or even counterproductive leads to a heightened sense of admiration for nature.

- *No feedback*: being in an natural environment implies the relative absence of other people, especially as compared to most urban environments. This precludes the effects of being

continually aware of the responses of others to our presence and behavior. This allows for rest, the absence of continuous vigilance that is present in populated environments.

- *Symbol*: over the course of history nature has been loaded with symbolic meaning. Of innocence, purity, goodness. “People seem to feel that nature is good.” (Brown, Keane, & Kaplan, 1986, p. 6). This may especially be the case in western societies in current

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centuries, a period in which people have become predominantly independent of the perils of nature. Historical research shows that the general image of nature in the Middle Ages was one of evil, horror, and fear (Knopf, 1987).

The outcome of these cognitive and affective processes is the currently dominant view of nature as an environment that promotes psychological restoration (Staats, 2012), and may increase competence, stimulate physical activity, and inspire reflection on life, thus promoting physical and psychological health (Hartig, Mitchell, de Vries, Frumkin et al., 2014).

Problematic consequences of man's relationship to nature

Humankind has gradually become more in control of nature, leading to a strongly increased world population, improved health, and material affluence, although these benefits are divided in very unequal ways across the world. This has come about with ecological costs, that become more and more prominent, of which climate change and biodiversity loss currently are the most pressing problems. These global problems of nature are generally considered the consequence of what is called a social dilemma, the uneven balance of the rewards and costs of nature exploitation, rewards accruing to the individual, costs to the community, described as the tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968). Generally this problematic state of affairs is partly due and at least increased by a value orientation that favors short term economic affluence. Insight in existing **@ value** orientations regarding the environment is provided by Dunlap, van Lier, and Jones (2000) who developed the **@ New Ecological Paradigm (NEP)**, a generally used measure to monitor ecological consciousness. However, despite a growing awareness of environmental problems as signaled by studies using the NEP, not nearly enough is done and the state of the environment deteriorates. This has started to become visible, in particular in **@ climate change** that is salient, grave, and dangerous in many ways: Rising temperatures increasingly lead to floods, droughts, storms, wild fires, and city temperatures that become unlivable. Psychologically this leads to a fear of natural phenomena, and even to mental depressions (Marazitti et al. 2021), for those directly and indirectly suffering from these ecological changes of the world. Under the surface fear of nature has never been completely absent it seems, as illustrated by effects of mortality salience when experimentally induced, leading to lower preference for wild as compared to cultured landscapes (Koole & Van den Berg, 2005).

Combining love of nature and ecological concern, to create a sustainable society

Traditionally love of nature, as expressed in preference for scenes of natural environments, and ecological concern, expressed as worries about the state of the environment, have been investigated separately. Relatively recent are findings that love of nature can lead to environmental concern and actions to reduce environmental damage (Kaiser, Hartig 2014 ; Collado, Staats, Corraliza, 2013). Currently, the viable concept to describe new ways of

interacting with nature, and building on both love of nature and environmental concern is ecosystem services (cf. @ **ecosystems**), covering technical, medical, and psychological uses of nature. To maximize the creation of these services, thus developing what is called nature-based solutions, the challenge is to

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increase the way people include nature into their representation of the self, their identity. Schultz (2002) elaborates the concept of inclusion of nature in the self in three dimensions: @ **connectedness with nature**, including nature within the cognitive representation of self; caring for nature, feeling close and familiar with nature; commitment to protect nature, the behavioral component, if not consequence, of including nature within the self. An important way to achieve sustainability will be to increase inclusion of nature within the self. “..... the only sure path to sustainability is through inclusion - Individuals must believe they are a part of nature” (Schultz, 2002, p. 74).