

Identity and the Natural Environment



---

# Identity and the Natural Environment

## The Psychological Significance of Nature

edited by Susan Clayton and Susan Opatow

All rights reserved. This book may be reproduced in whole or in part for personal or internal reference use only on the basis of payment of the per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, USA. For those organizations that have been granted a photocopy licence by CCC, a separate system of payment has been arranged. The fee code for users of the Copyright Clearance Center is 0898-0201/98 \$05.00.

This book was first published by MIT Press in 1997. This edition is published in the United States of America.

1. Experiencing Nature as Individuals 43  
2. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework  
3. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation  
4. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation

5. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation  
6. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation

7. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation  
8. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation

9. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation  
10. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation

11. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation  
12. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation

13. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation  
14. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation

15. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation  
16. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation

17. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation  
18. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation

19. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation  
20. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation

21. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation  
22. Environmental Identity: A Conceptual Framework and an Empirical Investigation

The MIT Press  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
London, England

environmental issue evoke strong moral considerations? We believe that the answer has to do with identity—how we define ourselves, others, and nature. This book is premised on the idea that people have strong feelings about nature because of its implications for both social and environmental identity. In chapter 10, a leader of an inner-city tree-planting program in Detroit puts it this way: “it just makes a difference, your environment, how you act and how you feel about yourself.”

### What Is Identity?

Identity is a concept with broad meaning, traditionally linked with self-concept and involving beliefs about who we are and who we want to be. However, there is little consensus about what identity is. Ongoing debates concern the extent to which identity is primarily single or multiple, independent or interdependent, personal or social (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997; Cross & Madson, 1997). In a psychoanalytic sense, identity is formed by separation: the developing child builds a sense of who it is by distinguishing itself from what it is not (Segal, 1973). Identity is also considered to be a product of social appraisal. We form a sense of ourselves based on the information we receive about ourselves from others (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Although identity, as a description of oneself, may be intuitively felt to be a stable personal attribute, even such enduring characteristics as gender and ethnicity are subject to situational and cultural variations that affect what is salient and how it is interpreted (Nagel, 1996).

Personal identity emerges in a social context that includes interpersonal and group memberships. This perspective emphasizes cultural aspects of identity and takes account of social interdependence (Snyder & Cantor, 1998). Identity in this context is not stable, but is layered, complex, and changing as it is negotiated in social interactions and conflicts (Carbaugh, 1996). As Martha Minow (1997) describes identity, it is more salient when it becomes fluid, such as when individuals or groups undergo geographical, social, and psychological shifts.

A conceptualization of identity in a changing social context is more complex than one that is static or purely intrapsychic, but it nevertheless remains a largely anthropocentric construct, rooted in multiple levels of social relationships. These analyses of identity miss the larger, non-human context within which all human relationships occur. In 1960

Harold Searles argued that a human relationship with the natural world is transcendentally important and ignored at peril to our psychological well-being (Searles, 1960). (See chapter 2 for a further discussion of Searles.) Yet psychological research has given scant attention to our relationship with the natural world. A broadened conception of identity would include how people see themselves in the context of nature, how people see animate and inanimate aspects of the natural world, how people relate to the natural world as a whole, and how people relate to each other in the context of larger environmental issues.

### What Is Nature?

Like "identity," definitions of "nature" and "the natural environment" are complex and contested. The predominant meaning has traditionally been "our nonhuman surroundings" (Simmons, 1993, p. 11) with an understood dichotomy between what is a result of human influence and what remains untouched. The dichotomy between the natural and the manufactured is, of course, artificial. Nature has long been subject to human influence through what is planted, supported, or tolerated, and what is exterminated either directly or through elimination of its habitat. McKibben (1989) has famously made the case that there is no more "nature" in the traditional sense: "By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial" (p. 58). Thus the idea that the experience of nature is separate from social experience is misleading. This myth may promote the idea that the preservation of the natural environment is irrelevant to the life of the average citizen, and contribute to the perception that environmentalists are misanthropic (see Morrison & Dunlap, 1986). In a book on Henry David Thoreau, David Botkin (2001) writes "This sense of isolation from nature reinforces the idea, prevalent today, that nature is 'out there' and that preserving nature is generally an activity that takes place over the horizon. . . . As a result, the conservation and protection of wild living resources is typically seen as an activity that is beyond our day-to-day urban experience" (p. 94). In this book, we use the terms *nature* and *the natural environment* in the average person's sense, to refer to environments in which the influence of humans is minimal or nonobvious, to living components of that environment (such as trees and animals), and to nonanimate natural environmental features, such as the ocean shore. Weigert (1997, p. 49) has

referred to this as the "relatively natural environment." However, we emphasize that the experience of nature can take place in urban settings as well as in remote wilderness areas.

### Identity and Nature

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have begun to explore the relevance of identity to the natural environment. Philosopher Carolyn Merchant (1992) has described different ways of valuing the environment that include extending the boundaries of what is important to oneself alone (egocentric), to humans in general (anthropocentric), and to the biosphere (ecocentric or biocentric). Psychological research (e.g., Axelrod, 1994; Stern & Dietz, 1994) has affirmed the significance of these different value orientations in predicting environmentally sustaining behavior. Biologist E. O. Wilson (e.g., 1984) has proposed a genetically based tendency to affiliate with nature, "biophilia," suggesting that the relationship with the natural world is a hard-wired part of human nature. Stephen Kellert (e.g., 1993, 1997) has elaborated the ways in which the biophilia tendency might be expressed, and has detailed the adaptive benefits that accrue even today from what he describes as the "link between personal identity and nature" (1993, p. 43).

Some have moved from theory to advocacy in arguing that people need to connect with nature at a deep and personal level, even to redefine themselves in a way that includes the natural world. A philosophical perspective known as "deep ecology" (Naess, 1989; see also chapter 2 in this volume) describes this as necessary in order to live a life that is in balance with nature. "Ecopsychology," similarly, represents a therapeutic orientation which holds that humans need to rediscover their ties to the natural world in order to experience full mental health (Roszak, 1992; Thomashow, 1998; Winter, 1996).

Our own work exploring distinct conceptions of justice with regard to environmental issues (Clayton, 2000; Clayton & Opatow, 1994) led us to the question of identity because beliefs about what is fair are fundamentally entwined with who we are, how we relate to others, and what that means in terms of rights and obligations (Clayton & Opatow, 2003). Opatow (1987, 1990) has argued that we distinguish persons and environmental entities with moral worth from those without such worth by

excluding the latter from considerations of fairness, justice, or the moral community. In other words, identity underlies beliefs about deserving and fairness. Research by Clayton and others (e.g., Clayton, 1996; Kahn, 1999) strongly suggests that nature and natural entities (trees, species, ecosystems) are given moral consideration by individuals who care about environmental issues. (See also Nash, 1989, and Stone, 1974, for historical and legal perspectives on the moral standing of nature.) Several writers have introduced terms that are similar to the focus of this book. Thomashow (1995), for example, has written about "ecological identity," meaning, in part, "the ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth" (p. 3). Similarly, Weigert has written about "environmental identity," meaning the "experienced social understandings of who we are in relation to, and how we interact with, the natural environment as other" (1997, p. 159). Others have described an "environmental self" or an "ecological self" (e.g., Cantrill & Senecah, 2001; Naess, 1989), but none of these terms has succeeded in claiming definitional turf or achieving consensus about its meaning (see Neisser, 1997 on the ecological self). This lack of consensus on terminology reflects the slipperiness of the concepts. When even "nature" and "identity" are hard to pin down, it is difficult—and not necessarily desirable—to construct a rigid definition of environmental identity. The fact that the concept has been approached from a number of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, however, reflects growing interest in the intersection between identity and environment as well as awareness of its practical significance.

### Environmental Identity Elaborated

We propose an integrative construct of environmental identity that encompasses multiple meanings as well as a recognition of the dynamic nature of identity. One way of thinking about environmental identity concerns the way in which we define the environment, the degree of similarity we perceive between ourselves and other components of the natural world, and whether we consider nature and nonhuman natural entities to have standing as valued components of our social and moral community (Opatow, 1993, 1996). For example, pre-technological cultures sometimes ascribe identity to natural forces and objects such as trees, animals, mountains, or winds, endowing them with intentionality,

1991; Parsons, Tassinary, Ulrich, Hebl, & Grossman-Alexander, 1998; Ulrich, 1984).

R. Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) and S. Kaplan (1995) have discussed the ability of the natural environment to serve as a restorative setting for people. By engaging our attention, taking us away from our mundane activities and settings, and providing a level of stimulation that is neither overly arousing nor boring, the natural environment allows us to replenish our attentional resources. Research by the Kaplans and others (Herzog et al., 1997; Korpela et al., 2001) has shown that people rate natural settings as the best place for achieving these restorative goals.

#### Environment and Self-Knowledge

To constitute an important aspect of identity, the natural environment must influence the way in which people think about themselves. The natural environment provides the opportunity not only for attentional restoration but also for self-reflection (Herzog et al., 1997). By allowing people the time and space to think about their own values, goals, and priorities, as well as, perhaps, providing relief from the usual concerns of self-presentation, the natural environment can play a vital role in the extent to which we define ourselves to ourselves. One study (Young & Crandall, 1984) even found a slight positive relationship between wilderness use and self-actualization. Self-actualized people (e.g., Maslow, 1970) are described as more accepting of themselves, more sensitive to their own feelings, more independent of their social environment, and as fulfilling their own potential: "They are people who have developed or are developing to the full stature of which they are capable" (Maslow, 1970, p. 150).

The self is often described as including the knower and the known—that is, that which perceives the self and the content of what is perceived (see Ashmore & Jussim, 1997). The natural environment may enable a person to become both a more perceptive knower and a more positively valued known. We understand ourselves better and like ourselves more.

Nature can provide increased understanding of our own abilities and influence in part because it does not change very much in response to a person's behavior; only our own position in nature changes (Scherl, 1989). In a social environment, other people respond to us in a way that is affected, not only by our own behavior, but also by their perception

of our behavior, our appearance and status, and by other forces that are invisible to us. If someone is rude to me, I cannot always tell what I may have done to elicit such behavior, or if I have done anything at all. This makes it difficult to predict the effect or outcome of my behavioral choices in the future. In a natural environment, it is clear what can be controlled and what cannot. If I am cold, it is because I did not accurately anticipate or appropriately dress for the local weather. The weather changes, but not in response to my behavior. Animals often do respond to us, but their motives (self-protection, hunger) tend to be straightforward and the impetus for their behavior clear. The link between my behavior and its consequences may be clearer in a natural than in a social environment.

In a broader sense, the natural environment informs us about what it means to be human (see chapter 4). We can only gain a thorough sense of our human identity—including, perhaps, an appropriate level of humility in the face of our own limitations—through comparison with nonhuman entities.

The natural environment also may be able to encourage a strong and positive sense of self. Three qualities seem to be desired parts of everyone's identity: autonomy, or self-direction; relatedness, or connection; and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Perceived autonomy can be enhanced in a natural environment because there are fewer commands or requests from others that limit behavioral choices. Although the physical environment provides some constraints on behavior, the limits are less explicit than in a social setting where one is ruled by laws, signs, and the expectations of others. Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) obtained detailed information about the experiences of women on trips in the wilderness. On the basis of interviews and journals, Fredrickson and Anderson state "For many of these women what made their wilderness experience especially meaningful was the fact that there was virtually no reason to be anyone but themselves" (1999, p. 30).

Relatedness comes from the opportunity to feel like a part of a functioning system. Aron and McLaughlin-Volpe (2001) have argued that "self-expansion" is a fundamental human motivation, which can be achieved through redefining the self in a way that includes others. Many seem to reach this state through experiences with the natural environment. For some people it is experienced as a spiritual dimension, a connection with Mother Earth, or a unity with Gaia; for others, it is simply

a way of fitting oneself into the larger picture, as part of an environment, a world, a functioning ecosystem. This redefinition of self is one of the primary tenets of deep ecology (Naess, 1989).

Competence comes from the feeling of self-sufficiency: getting around under our own steam; perhaps showing survival skills through living off the land, climbing a steep mountain, or staring down one's fear of the dark. The women interviewed by Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) talked about the sense of accomplishment they experienced, and of getting to know their own physical capabilities. R. Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) have shown that people's preference of natural to human-influenced environments is related to their perceived competence in a natural environment. The sense of competence can also be a significant part of experiences with nature in an urban setting (see chapter 10). It is interesting that De Young (2000) has also emphasized the importance of the desire for competence in motivating environmentally sustainable behavior.

The natural environment thus seems to provide a particularly good source of self-definition, based on an identity formed through interaction with the natural world and on self-knowledge obtained in an environmental context.