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EDITORIAL

Considering humans as integral components of "nature"

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Earth Connection, a term coined by one of *Ecological Solutions and Evidence*'s Senior Editors, Carolyn Kurle (Aguilera, 2020), to describe a goal of her conservation research and teaching at the University of California San Diego, refers to the deeper relationship people can develop with our planet when we have regular access to natural surroundings. The concept is similar to ideas put forth by those decrying "nature-deficit disorder" (NDD) as a problem that could be solved by providing people greater access to wild places in order to promote our well-being and to activate within us a more conscious desire to preserve the environment.

Research clearly demonstrates that exposure to nature is related to a suite of both hedonic (experience of pleasure or feeling good) and eudemonic (experience of meaning and purpose or functioning well) well-being metrics and other benefits for people, including lower stress, better mood, improved working memory, reduced risk of psychiatric disorders, and increased positive feelings of belonging, self-esteem, satisfaction with life and gratitude (e.g. Capaldi et al., 2017; Fagerholm et al., 2020; Richardson & Hamlin, 2021; Sandifer et al., 2015; Schertz & Berman, 2019; Weir, 2020). In addition, data also indicate that people who regularly experience activities that nourish their need for Earth Connection have increased motivation to engage in positive conservation behaviours (Richardson & Hamlin, 2021). Thus, the preservation, growth and development of natural spaces, and people's access to them, are important considerations when accounting for the services intact ecosystems provide to people.

However, what if we consider the idea that the very concept of encouraging Earth Connection to combat the negative outcomes postulated by the existence of NDD and promote greater appreciation and protection of the Earth's natural spaces sets us as humans apart from that with which we are already fully integrated (see Dalrymple, 2022; Fletcher, 2017)? By promoting the very idea that people exist in their everyday lives as mostly or wholly separated from "natural" ecosystems, and that reaching the full potential for happiness, contentment, ease and optimal functioning requires continual reconnection with "nature," are not we promoting a false dichotomy that people are not of nature to begin with?

Could we step back and consider that people are an integral part of the natural and wholly untamed components of the Earth? The elevation to our best selves can certainly involve spending more time consciously exploring what is traditionally considered "nature" (e.g. national parks, urban greenspaces, beaches, forests, mountains, etc.), but might it also involve similar connections forged among the bipeds—specifically, other humans—with which we share an evolutionary history? Can the benefits inherent to establishing a personal Earth Connection also be achieved simply by considering ourselves and our fellow people as "natural resources" who are also beautiful, unique and wild and who should be revered, explored, protected and shepherded as carefully as conservation biologists strive to protect those undeveloped "natural" spaces we deem ecologically important? Suppose we stop viewing people and nature as separate entities, but instead experience ourselves and those around us as wholly integrated aspects of Earth's vast treasures.

This is not a new idea. Indigenous cultures from around the world have long recognized that people are inherently intertwined with nature. For example, Paula Gunn Allen, a Native American from the Laguna Pueblo tribe in New Mexico, USA writes, "It is not a matter of being 'close to nature' ... The Earth is, in a very real sense, the

same as our self (or selves) … That knowledge, though perfect, does not have associated with it the exalted romance of the sentimental 'nature lovers', nor does it have, at base, any self-conscious 'appreciation' of the land … It is a matter of fact, one known equably from infancy, remembered and honoured at levels of awareness that go beyond consciousness, and that extend long roots into primary levels of mind, language, perception, and all the basic aspects of being (Allen, 1979; Booth, 2003)."

Consideration of people as integral components of nature does not in any way diminish the research demonstrating positive benefits to humanity from exposure to areas traditionally considered "natural". Nor does it diminish the prioritization of ecosystem conservation so people have continued access to and inspiration from nature's recreational, spiritual and cultural aspects. Nor does it negate the scientific and practical reality that preservation of intact ecosystems is vital to safe-guard and enhance their optimal functioning so they will continue to provide invaluable services to humanity, such as carbon sequestration, pollination, clean air and water, shoreline protection, decomposition, food, fuel and building materials. Rather, it is an invitation to reframe the dichotomous assumption that is inherent to the very idea that people are suffering from NDD because they are entirely separate from that earthy wildness with which they need to connect.

As outlined in the study of Fletcher (2017), creating an artificial separation between nature and humanity places the onus of Earth's preservation on each individual's responsibility to increase their personal connection to the "natural" aspects of the planet, thus pulling attention away from the "overarching political economy of ecological degradation that…should be a main focus of attention." Instead of directing much of our environmental education toward the concept of creating Earth Connection that reinforces the idea of humanity's inherent separation from non-human life on the planet, it may be of equal or more benefit to instead focus attention and resources on the underlying causes of environmental degradation that arise from our willingness to separate people from each other and from "nature" in our pursuit of the "cultural, economic, and political systems that contribute to alienation—poverty, racial segregation, cultural alienation, environmental racisms, and rampant overconsumption" (Dickinson, 2013).

Hand in hand with these concepts of separating people from the "natural world" are those related to "fortress conservation," whereby conservationists sequester land deemed necessary habitat for wildlife refugia (Counsell, 2022; Germond-Duret, 2022; Haysom, 2022; Rudd et al., 2021). This can result in separating the land and wildlife from the people and cultures with current and ancestral connections to those wild spaces. Often the policies directed at conserving and maintaining optimal functionality in ecosystems disproportionately disregards and impairs the poorest people who are most dependent upon the services provided by the ecosystems targeted for environmental intervention projects (Fry et al., 2017). So, not only do fortress conservation practices serve to further separate people and nature, but they can also result in expropriation, environmental colonialism and the preservation of the wealth generated by resource extraction and other exploitative practices that damage the environment to those with power. The costs of wild conservation are transferred to those whose lands are deemed relatively pristine so must be taken away and protected from the very people who rely on those lands and species for their livelihoods, spiritual connection and habitation (Fletcher, 2017; Rudd et al., 2021).

Reimagining the ways in which we teach, practice, research and publish environmental conservation to move beyond our history of separating humans from that which we deem "natural" will require a deep exploration of how conservation science is conducted, what it means to be part of "nature", and how best to study, preserve, enjoy and experience the considerable benefits available to people from wild spaces (e.g. Chaigneau et al., 2019; Fleishman & Brown, 2019; Fry et al., 2017; Houlden et al., 2021). Rather than relying only upon visits to and connection with the ever-dwindling "natural" areas on our gorgeous planet for renewal, inspiration and all the other positive benefits we receive from immersion in wild lands, imagine turning toward other people and viewing them and ourselves as fully integrated components of Earth's wildlife and wilderness. In doing so, we may discover that all people hold within their depths wonders equivalent to ancient Sequoia trees, majestic volcanic mountain ranges, crystal blue alpine lakes, virgin tropical forests, fierce African lions, gentle koala bears and mysterious octopuses. We may discover ample inspiration for protecting the Earth and its gifts to humanity by recognizing the beauty inherent to the conservation of and true connection with our fellow humans. When we refuse to accept that people and nature are inherently separate, but rather inextricably intertwined with a shared and ancient history, then we can live from a place of wholeness with the Earth—and experience the truth that we are already integral facets of that which makes up the ethos of Earth Connection.

If you are a practitioner, an academic or otherwise part of a group who already imagines and realizes these concepts, then *Ecological Solutions and Evidence* is your journalistic home. We welcome your Practice Insights, Perspective, Research and Review submissions on these topics as you help us broaden everyone's inclusion in the vast expanse that is "nature."

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