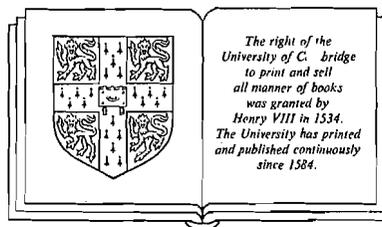


# The Experience of Nature

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A Psychological Perspective

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## INTRODUCTION: NATURE AND HUMAN NATURE

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**N**ATURE is a valued and appreciated part of life. Examples abound. People plant flowers and shrubs and nurture house plants; cities invest heavily in trees; citizens band together to preserve natural settings they have never seen; landscapes for centuries have been the subject of painting and poetry. Nature seems to be important to people. Though substantial sums of money are spent on nature and natural settings, it is hard to justify the role nature plays in rational terms. In fact, people with relatively little money are no less likely than the more affluent to have a splash of colorful flowers in front of their homes. Bond proposals for parks have often passed even when other issues fail. The grief neighbors feel when "their" tree is removed can hardly be explained on economic grounds.

It is no doubt possible to provide alternative explanations for any one of these examples. As a group, however, they provide at least circumstantial evidence that nature is important in itself rather than for some extrinsic reason. Further evidence in support of this hypothesis is provided by several recent studies using special populations. Verderber (1986) has shown that the quality of the view out the window is a significant factor in the recovery of patients in physical medicine and rehabilitation wards of six hospitals. Ulrich (1984) demonstrated that the content of the view is important in hospital patients' recovery from surgery, with nature content contributing to faster recovery. Moore's (1981) study showed a dramatic relationship between inmates' use of health care facilities at a large federal prison and the view from their cell. Those whose view was of other inmates sought health care most often. Of the inmates whose views were of areas outside the prison building, the ones who looked out onto

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the surrounding farmland sought health care least of all. West's (1986) study further supported these findings in another prison setting.

These carefully designed studies established clear support that nature in itself plays an important role. After all, it would be most unlikely that the patients and inmates were "using" nature for some other goal, such as to achieve status, to gain personal identity, or to establish territory. The purpose of each of these studies, however, was not to explain why nature plays such an important role, but to make it clear that there is a meaningful phenomenon to examine and that there are important implications in terms of basic human needs.

Many of the studies reported in this volume provide further evidence for the importance of nature to people, but that is not our primary purpose. Rather, our intention is to go beyond this, to focus on what nature does, for whom, under what circumstances.

## ABOUT NATURE

This book is about the natural environment, about people, and about the relationship between them. It is about things many have known but few have tried to study empirically. It is about things for which there is only a limited vocabulary.

Nature connotes many settings. As is clear already, our use of the word *nature* is intended to be broad and inclusive (although, for the most part, the discussion excludes fauna). The discussion of nature here is not limited to those faraway, vast, and pristine places where there has been little human intervention, or to places designated as "natural areas" by some governmental authority. Nature includes parks and open spaces, meadows and abandoned fields, street trees and backyard gardens. We are referring to places near and far, common and unusual, managed and unkempt, big, small, and in-between, where plants grow by human design or even despite it. We are referring to areas that would often be described as green, but they are also natural when the green is replaced by white or brown or red and yellow.

Nature includes plants and various forms of vegetation. It also includes settings or landscapes or places with plants. Thus the plants and their arrangement in a space,

and the juxtaposition of the plants to other elements in the environment, all play a role in our discussion.

The expression *natural environment* is not intended to include only purely natural elements, any more than the *built environment* refers exclusively to constructed elements. Similarly, the contrast between *natural* on the one hand and *urban* and *rural* on the other we find to be unhelpful. Much of our discussion is about the nature that can be found in the urban and in the rural context.

It is clear that whereas the concept of nature is very much part of the human experience the language for discussing it is neither rich nor precise. Although *nature* and *natural environment* as used here are difficult to define adequately, they refer to things and places we have all experienced.

#### ABOUT PEOPLE

The studies discussed in parts I and II explore different natural settings and diverse facets of the way people relate to such places. Though these studies have been guided by a theoretical perspective, it is even more clearly the case that the theory has been guided by the studies. Each of the chapters deals with both the studies and the explanatory framework. It may be helpful to provide an introduction to this framework. It is a view that considers humans as deeply concerned with information and examines the environment as a vital source of information.

Human functioning depends on information.<sup>1</sup> Much of this information is provided by the immediate environment. There are signs, both verbal (such as a street name) and nonverbal (such as a doorbell), that provide guidance to behavior. There are combinations and arrangements of elements that constantly require deciphering: a group of people standing near each other, all facing the same way; a long hallway with many doors; a series of cash registers; a group of trees where two paths cross. Some of the information is urgent and requires action; some is made urgent by size, motion, or color and may be difficult to ignore despite being irrelevant to one's current goals.

A great deal of the information that is essential to functioning is already stored in our heads based on previous experience. Such stored information not only makes it possible to assess a current situation but is essential in

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anticipating what might happen next. Humans can close their eyes and imagine, they can consider alternate plans, they can give advice or instructions - all based on information that is not immediately present in the environment.

It is clear from this discussion that information is not only what scholars consume and intellectuals exchange. In fact, it is reasonable to say that information (or knowledge) is the common human coin. The storage and processing of information are the cornerstone of human functioning. In addition to relying on the information that has already been acquired, humans are active in their pursuit of additional information. In fact, they often seek information even when having it makes little discernible difference. Indeed, the interest in useless information is so powerful that, according to Postman (1985) in his provocative *Amusing ourselves to death*, it is used against us by the media. He considers television, newspapers, and Trivial Pursuit to be striking examples of this unfortunate turn of events.

People are particularly aware of information that is visual, that concerns what they see. That does not mean that people interpret the information in visual terms exclusively; rather, visual stimuli are effective in conjuring associated information. The sight of water provides information about potential opportunities, which may or may not be visual in themselves. Magazine advertisements rely upon the reader's imagination (and prior experience) to recognize other aspects of the scene than the visual material that is presented. Visual material is thus particularly effective in evoking other kinds of information that had previously been associated with the presented information. (The expression *I see* is an interesting manifestation of the dominance of the visual mode without the necessity that it refer exclusively to visual information.)

Similarly, humans are strongly oriented to spatial information. A nearby moving object (for example, a person passing one's office door) is difficult to ignore. A great deal of information that is not necessarily spatial is, in fact, coded in spatial terms. There are many examples of this in the language (e.g., reference to higher orders, bottom line, feeling high or low or under it). A great deal of problem solving and thinking involves arraying pieces of the problem in a real or imaginary space. Thus, both conceptually and with respect to information in the current environment, people are sensitive to relative location.

One more item is essential to discuss in our brief over-

view of the theoretical perspective that guides this book. We have said that information is essential to human functioning, that people store and use huge amounts of information, and that they actively seek more information. None of this speaks to the strong feelings people have about information. The relationship we humans have to information is, in many situations, far from neutral. We assess current and future situations in terms of whether they are/will be good or bad, pleasant or painful. The anticipation of an unpleasant situation, even if one is currently in a pain-free situation, can make one's feelings negative. Similarly, people whose conditions are extremely painful can feel much better if they anticipate a hopeful future.

From this perspective, then, people not only are adroit in their use of information but crave it and continuously evaluate it. The evaluation of information is essential; effective functioning relies on sorting the good from the bad, the useful from the useless. Humans judge situations with such facility that they are often not aware of the fact that such an evaluation is occurring. The rapid intuitive evaluation by people of other people is a widely recognized phenomenon; the evaluation of environments occurs with comparable unobtrusiveness and comparable facility.<sup>2</sup>