

5. Relationship with Nature

When America was discovered by Europeans, it had truly outstanding natural resources and systems: vast forests of old-growth trees, including the largest and oldest in the world; extensive central plains, where herds of millions of buffalo and antelope kept grasslands healthy; long, towering mountain chains rich in diversity; extensive wetlands with millions of birds; long coasts whose waters teemed with life; extensive river and lake systems with pure waters and regular flows; expansive deserts with clear skies; an astounding and abundant biodiversity of plants, animals and insects; and at least a hundred million people living in harmony and balance with natural systems, with deep respect for nature and spirit. There was essentially no pollution, and humans had relatively insignificant impacts on the environment.

The arriving, male-dominated Europeans and multiplying white U.S. people, generally, had an arrogant and self-centered view of nature: that man is superior to nature, and nature is there for man to exploit.

We proceeded to aggressively cut down the trees, kill the animals, fish out the waters, deplete the soils, dig out the minerals and oil, plow the grasslands under, and commit genocide on the native peoples, and on the buffalo that fed them. There were relatively few efforts to replace what we took. We carved up the landscape with roads and fences, cutting off abilities to roam. We developed and deployed industries and technologies that polluted the air, water, soil and living beings, without concern. Essentially, we pillaged and plundered the land and native people. We still do that. For the most part, it's done to accumulate material wealth, money and things money can buy, social status and power.

Systems of land ownership were deployed. If no person with legal status had a legal claim on the land, we could claim it, and Native Americans typically had no legal status or legal claim on the land. Otherwise, we could buy it from whoever did. Ownership meant we could do whatever we wanted with the land, and anything on or under it, which was typically to exploit it for wealth. Native people had no concept of land ownership. They simply lived in harmony with natural life webs, wherever they went.

When whatever had value on the land had been removed and converted to money, at often ridiculously low exchange rates, the lands were converted to agriculture, raising plants and animals that could be killed and converted to money. Agriculture was managed to maximize financial returns, typically with a short-term view, with rampant uses of fertilizers, bioengineering and poisons that harm natural systems and living things. The arrogance was closely accompanied by ignorance of natural systems, so agriculture depleted soils, damaged waters, sickened life and vastly reduced biodiversity.

Claim, steal or buy; own, control, exploit; sell and move on if depleted; repeat (while lost in our heads). That summarizes common historical U.S. people's relationship to land and nature.

Of course, this is oversimplified, but to make a point. U.S. history is not just the white-washed good-guy fairy tale U.S. people are taught in schools. His-story isn't just the scrubbed propaganda of the mainstream power elite. Histories are as rich and complex as the perspectives of all the points of consciousness in existence in a period of time, and in the times imagining that future time from the past, and in the times reflecting on that past from the future.

There are, of course, the perspectives and efforts, actions and relationships, dreams and values of many who did not and do not maintain this dominate exploitative and disrespectful relationship to nature. They have led to other commendable realities, such as the creation of the U.S. National Parks system,

which has preserved representative swaths of nature; intentional communities endeavoring to exist in harmony with nature, people and natural systems; individuals, states and localities preserving lands in parks; and people trying to practice sustainable “organic” permaculture systems.

Today, most U.S. people live in some version of cities or urban developments, carved up by pavement, automobiles and fences, where natural systems have been so damaged they are largely unrecognizable. Food is transported in, in poisonous exhaust spewing vehicles. Streams and creeks are buried and dead. Wild animals are virtually non-existent. The air is foul. Most stars are invisible. The wetlands are gone. The water is polluted. People are isolated and insulated in boxes. Noise pollution is everywhere.

Most people do not experience what it is like to be in a balanced, healthy natural environment, where land, air and water are clean, where the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and physical sensations are pure, where the energies are harmonious, rather than chaotic and colliding. Many of us have never seen a wild or farm animal, outside of a zoo, how food is grown, or how many stars are visible on a clear night.

We’ve never tasted pure water, energized as falling rain or by tumbling down streams. We’ve never breathed fresh air or tasted fresh, natural food. We’ve never heard silence, or the beautiful symphony of frogs and insects on a summer night, watching fireflies dance in the air. We’ve never seen how wild animals behave in nature. We’ve never felt the spirit of life, thriving in natural balance and abundance.

Without these experiences, we miss out on personal, subjective spiritual experiences that naturally occur in their midsts: feelings of wonder and awe, of spirit lifting, of extremely moving natural beauty, of peace and quiet, of balance and harmony, of something greater than ourselves or our kind, like myriad stars and galaxies promenading across the heavens. These are absolutely essential experiences of wholesome life, without which we are cheated, deprived of natural spirituality, insensitive to many of the most important dimensions of life. We are ignorant of nature, including our own true nature.

Today, without consciously knowing it, many suffer from nature deficit disorders, emotional, spiritual, psychological and existential problems arising from our separation from natural systems, balance and harmony. Without these experiences and perspectives, it’s too easy to be ignorantly complicit in practices and behaviors that destroy vital natural systems.

The weight of all of the humans in the world is about 300 million tons. The weight of humans’ farm animals is about 700 million tons. The weight of all other surviving large animals in the world is now around 100 million tons.¹ We are all complicit in the extinctions of the rest of these large animals, and we now expect the extinction of another million species as a result of our actions in the near future.²

Without direct relationships with nature, we miss out on essential, personal spiritual experiences that provide meaning, deliver wholesome and natural enjoyment, facilitate inspiration in life, create a natural and intuitive respect for nature, and teach us about our own true natures. We are literally sick and don’t know it. We are complicit in the destruction of natural environments and species, and it means nothing to us. We have little contact with our own internal nature, what we really are as beings.

It is extremely important that humanity reconnect with nature, have deep, personal and natural relationships and experiences with it, and develop intuitive respect and appreciation for nature and its myriad expressions. We are expressions of nature. Nature is much bigger than we are. We must stop behaving like its spoiled and sick step-children. We must allow nature to thrive.

Let's naturally, with awareness, common sense and humility: appreciate, learn from, know and emulate nature and natural systems, that we're grateful parts of, not ignorant masters of, something far greater than we are; stop altering, disrupting and harming natural ecosystems, soils and climates, stop poisoning our air, lands, waters, bodies and minds, quit making noise and light pollution, stop growing the human population so fast, and quit harming other beings and species, to the point of causing their extinctions! Let's respect Earth's commons, the shared environments in which we are all meant to thrive together! Let's use only energy and transportation we truly need, without waste or harms in our environments!

¹ *Sapiens : a Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval N. Harari, New York, Harper, 2015

² "One million species face extinction, U.N. report says. And humans will suffer as a result.", Darryl Fears, The Washington Post, May 6, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2019/05/06/one-million-species-face-extinction-un-panel-says-humans-will-suffer-result/?utm_term=.d76b28245264