



# NATURE IN ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY



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## Objective: To understand the 'BEING' OF 'NATURE' in Environmental Psychology

### 1. INTRODUCTION

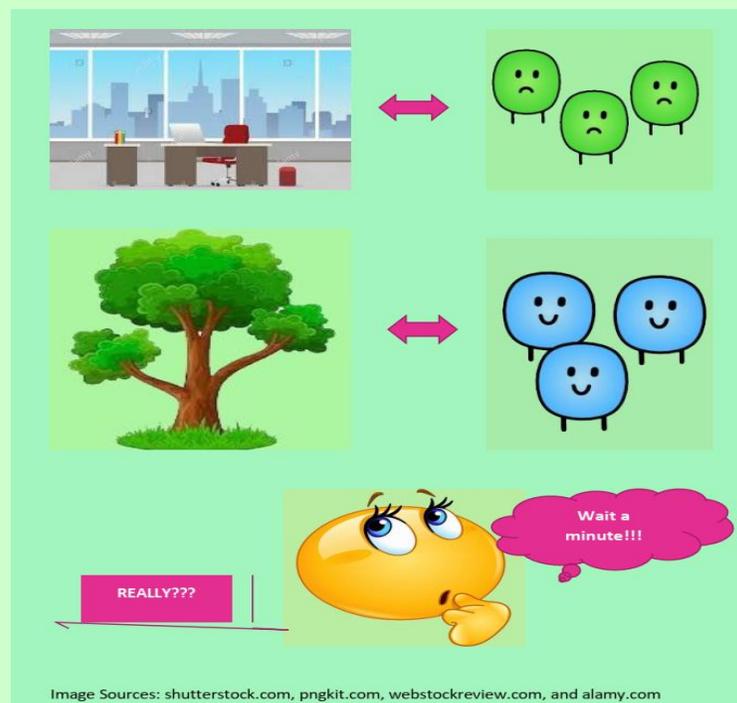
Environmental Psychology broadly studies the relationship between individuals and built, as well as natural environment. Rising awareness about the environmental catastrophe worldwide had necessitated the use of psychology to understand the psychological correlates of both the presence and absence of 'environment', and the associated pro-environmental behaviors. Theory of Landscape perception attempted to suggest improved ways of landscape management based on people's opinions about landscapes. An extension of the same in terms of the 'presence of nature' was also shown to be associated with an overall feeling of improved health. While many studies explore different aspects of these human-nature interactions, and their role in organizing and understanding various conservation strategies and consumption patterns, the definition or conceptualization of nature remains somewhat ambiguous. This paper looks into the 'nature' that is central to environmental psychology, and examines the broad themes and suggestions that project a specific image of it.

### 2. METHOD

The paper examined some of the highest cited articles in the with the keywords 'nature', 'pro-environmental', and 'health' from within the discipline of environmental psychology. A content analysis was done, specifically looking for the broad thematic generalizations about the meaning of nature, the presence or absence of which had significant behavioral as well as health related consequences.

### References

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### 4. CONCLUSION

By endorsing a static image of nature, research in environmental psychology merely promotes a self-seeking engagement with nature. While it has certain advantages, but, for environmental psychology to emerge as a distinct voice in the ongoing discourse of environmental crisis, it might have to revisit these conceptualizations, and engage deeply with a dynamic view of both nature, and human-nature interactions. There is a need for a multifaceted philosophical investigation of nature, so that nature can be understood as something more than "a stage on which the drama of human lives and history is acted out" (Kohak, 2000).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most research articles that explore psychological correlates of human-nature interactions often do not clearly specify what they mean by nature. The major themes regarding 'nature' focus on its innate connection with humans, its fundamental role in different forms of life-support, including the role it might play in child development, and its impact on overall health and well-being of individuals. Nature is usually defined and understood through the prism of various affectual changes that it might or might not induce. For instance, 'aesthetic appreciation, and health and wellbeing' have been found to be correlated with 'exposure to visual landscapes' (Velarde, Fry and Tveit, 2007). Further, having some plants in a room, or a poster of 'nature', or gazing at 'nature' through windows is found to be equally capable of uplifting moods and energy levels (Raanaas et al 2011; Kweon et al 2008; Ulrich et al 1991). Similarly, 'pro-environmental' behavior is also psychologically correlated with affinity to nature. Thus, there is little discussion about nature as-it-is or about nature for-its-own-sake and nature is largely constructed in terms of the presence of forests, trees, lakes etc.

By not making a concrete commitment towards offering an immanent definition of nature, most environmental psychological research seems to reduce nature to a stable yet indifferent bio-physical system. The underlying assumption is that by qualifying and quantifying the benefits of exposure, or intimacy to nature, individuals can be convinced about the importance of engaging with and therefore conserving nature. This ignores a basic ecological tenet: nature does not concern itself with the benefit of any specific species. Events such as floods, volcanos, Tsunamis etc., are also a manifestation of nature, but they do not necessarily imply any 'evil' or inherent worthlessness of nature. For people who face the wrath of nature, merely listing out benefits of close affinity to nature can be patronizing. More importantly, the inherent worth of nature seems to be driven only by the quantifiable benefits that it can induce, which amounts to a subtle objectification and commodification of nature. It is only in seeking pleasure or a better sense of 'self' that nature becomes worthy of conservation.

Additionally, research overlooks the politics of nature (Latour 2004). The consistent emphasis on the need to establish or enhance 'contact' with 'nature' does not account for the disenchantment that is a function of state politics and varying psycho-social variables that control and manipulate this 'contact', and one's embeddedness in 'nature'. For instance, indigenous forest dwelling communities might be thoroughly enjoying the benefits of nature, yet they are equally disturbed because their movements within and outside forests are largely controlled, as are their aspirations of building a 'successful urban' life. Thus, another set of questions immediately follow and remain somewhat hazy: for whom is nature 'beneficial' and who makes these decisions.