On the Constraints of Environmental Agency

A Single-Case Phenomenological Examination of Nature Attachment and Moral Distress

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Case Report

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Contents

PART I

FOUNDATION

1

RATIONALE

Modern urbanisation patterns have reduced opportunities for regular nature contact among many populations (Cox et al., 2017), raising questions about consequences for both individual wellbeing and environmental stewardship. While quantitative research has documented associations between nature exposure and mental health outcomes (Bratman et al., 2019; Gascon et al., 2015), these approaches may not fully capture the subjective meanings individuals attach to their nature experiences or the personal narratives through which people understand connections between nature contact and their psychological states. Qualitative investigation could reveal dimensions of these relationships that remain less visible in survey-based research, particularly regarding how individuals make sense of the mechanisms through which nature experiences might influence both immediate affective states and longer-term patterns of environmental concern.

This study explored how one person articulates the psychological impacts of their nature experiences, with particular attention to perceived influences on wellbeing and environmental attitudes. The research question guiding this investigation was: How do personal experiences with nature appear to shape an individual's psychological wellbeing and environmental attitudes? Through detailed examination of one person's account, this analysis aimed to identify themes that might illuminate broader patterns while respecting the particular context and meaning-making processes of the individual participant.

PART II

EPISTEOMOLOGY

2

METHOD

2.1 Theoretical Positioning

This study employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), positioned within a contextualist epistemology that acknowledges both individual meaning-making and broader social-cultural contexts shaping experience. This positioning recognizes that while individuals construct personal meanings from their experiences, these constructions occur within social and cultural frameworks that provide interpretive resources and constraints. The analysis sought patterns of meaning across the dataset rather than quantifying explicit content, privileging interpretative depth over descriptive coverage. This approach recognizes the researcher's active role in theme development, with themes understood as analytical constructs created through the interpretive process rather than emerging passively from data.

As researcher, my own positive experiences with nature and interest in environmental psychology inevitably shaped both the interview and analytical process. I approach long periods in natural settings as psychologically restorative and hold concerns about environmental degradation that influenced what I noticed and how I interpreted the participant's account. Rather than positioning this as bias requiring elimination, I approached it as productive context enabling empathetic engagement while maintaining analytical awareness. Throughout analysis, I attended to how my interpretations reflected particular theoretical lenses and personal experiences, considering alternative readings while making transparent the rationale for interpretations presented here. This reflexive stance acknowledges that the analysis represents one possible reading shaped by my subjectivity, while arguing that this reading is defensible and subject to falsibility when examined against the data.

2.2 Participant Protocol

The participant was a 34-year-old urban professional with self-reported regular nature engagement throughout childhood and continuing into adulthood. Recruitment occurred through purposive sampling, with the participant selected based on their history of diverse nature experiences and willingness to reflect on potential psychological impacts. Following informed consent that assured confidentiality, a semi-structured interview explored the participant's nature experiences and perceived psychological impacts. The 45-minute interview prioritized phenomenological attention to lived experience, using prompts such as "What happened during that experience?" and "How did you feel then?" rather than "Why?" questions that might elicit

intellectualized explanations divorced from experiential immediacy. This approach aimed to access concrete descriptions and felt experiences rather than post-hoc theorizing about causal mechanisms.

The interview concluded with invitation for additional reflections and brief summary checking whether key points resonated with the participant's intended meanings, providing opportunity to clarify misunderstandings or add dimensions that had not emerged through the preceding questions. The audio-recorded interview was transcribed verbatim, producing approximately 6,800 words of text.

2.3 Analytical Protocol

Analysis followed Braun & Clarke (2006) and Braun & Clarke (2019) reflexive approach through six phases, though these phases were not strictly linear but involved recursive movement between different analytical activities. Phase 1 involved repeated reading of the transcript while listening to audio, developing familiarity with both semantic content and emotional tone conveyed through vocal expression. This immersion generated preliminary impressions about potential areas of interest, though formal coding had not yet commenced.

Phase 2 generated 78 initial codes through systematic line-by-line examination, capturing both semantic content, what the participant explicitly stated, and latent meanings representing interpretive reading of underlying concepts or assumptions. Coding was inclusive at this stage, with segments receiving multiple codes where applicable and maintaining sufficient surrounding context to preserve meaning. Examples of codes included "childhood nature as freedom," "nature reducing mental clutter," "feeling small in natural settings," and "guilt about environmental impact."

Phase 3 involved sorting codes into candidate themes through visual mapping techniques, exploring relationships and patterns across codes by arranging them spatially to identify potential clustering. This exploratory phase generated approximately eight candidate themes, though their boundaries remained tentative and relationships among them unclear. Phase 4 reviewed candidate themes for internal homogeneity, checking that coded extracts within each theme formed coherent patterns, and external heterogeneity, ensuring themes were sufficiently distinct from one another. This review led to collapsing two candidate themes that proved difficult to distinguish consistently, subdividing one theme encompassing qualitatively different content, and eliminating one candidate theme appearing weakly supported by the data.

Phase 5 defined and named each theme, developing preliminary analytical narratives specifying scope and boundaries while clarifying relationships among themes. Theme names were developed to be concise yet sufficiently descriptive to convey the essence of each pattern. Phase 6 involved selecting illustrative extracts and constructing the analytical narrative presented below, with extract selection aimed at providing vivid examples capturing theme essence while representing the range of content within themes. Throughout this process, theme identification represented one possible reading shaped by my theoretical understanding and experiences, considering alternative interpretations while presenting the structure judged most strongly sup-

ported by the data.

PART III

ANALYSIS

3

FINDINGS

Analysis identified four themes characterizing how this participant understood psychological impacts of nature experiences. Table 3.1 presents the thematic structure with brief definitions, providing overview of the interpretive framework developed through analysis.

Table 3.1: *Thematic Structure Overview*

Theme	Definition
1. Nature as Cognitive Restoration	Nature experiences providing mental relief from cognitive demands through shift in attentional mode
2. Perspective Transformation Through Immersion	Immersive nature experiences producing lasting shifts in psychological perspective regarding self in relation to broader temporal and spatial contexts
3. The Disconnect Between Environmental Values and Action	Tension between strong environmental concern and behavioural realities, sometimes intensified rather than resolved by nature experiences
4. Nature Connection as Moral Motivation	Emotional investment in natural places motivating conservation-oriented actions despite recognized limitations of individual behaviour

3.1 Theme 1: Nature as Cognitive Restoration

The participant consistently described nature contact as providing mental relief from daily cognitive demands, characterizing urban work environments as producing what they termed "mental clutter" requiring constant attention management and decision-making:

> When I'm in the office all day, it's like my brain gets... cluttered. There's too much going on, too many things competing for attention. Even just stepping out to the

> park at lunch, there's something about being around trees that makes that feeling ease up.

This restoration involved attentional shifts rather than mental emptiness or absence of thought. The participant distinguished between effortful attention required by work tasks and a more receptive, less demanding quality of attention experienced during nature contact. This difference was characterized not merely as relaxation but as a specific form of cognitive replenishment, with the participant describing improved focus and mental capacity following nature contact:

> After a walk in natural areas, I notice I can focus better. Tasks that felt overwhelming before seem more manageable. It's like my capacity to concentrate gets recharged somehow.

The restorative quality appeared to emerge from what the participant termed nature's "gentle" engagement of attention through inherently fascinating features such as moving water, rustling leaves, and varied natural forms that captured interest without requiring directed mental effort. This contrasted sharply with urban environments described as demanding constant attention filtering, navigation of social stimuli, and decision-making about where to direct focus. The cognitive restoration attributed to nature appeared particularly valued as counterbalance to what the participant characterized as the "constant stimulation and multitasking" of modern work life, suggesting that psychological impacts might be understood partly in relation to the specific cognitive demands of the participant's daily context.

However, the participant acknowledged variability in these restorative effects, noting that brief or interrupted nature contact sometimes provided less benefit than longer, more immersive experiences. This observation suggested the importance of both quality and duration of nature exposure for restoration to occur, though the participant struggled to articulate precise thresholds or identify exactly what distinguished more from less restorative encounters.

3.2 Theme 2: Perspective Transformation Through Immersion

Beyond immediate cognitive restoration, certain nature experiences, particularly those involving remote or expansive natural landscapes, produced shifts in psychological perspective that persisted beyond the experience itself. These shifts appeared to involve changes in how the participant situated themselves in relation to broader temporal and spatial scales:

> Standing on that mountain overlook, looking out at this landscape that's been there for thousands of years—you just feel small. But it's not a bad small, not diminishing. It's more like... my everyday worries and stresses suddenly seem less important in perspective.

This perspective shift involved several interrelated elements. First, the participant described experiencing themselves as embedded within larger natural and temporal contexts that exceeded

individual human concerns and timescales. Second, this recognition appeared to generate feelings the participant characterized as both humbling and oddly comforting, suggesting complex emotional responses not reducible to simple positive or negative valence. Third, these psychological shifts seemed to extend beyond the immediate experience, influencing the participant's subsequent emotional responses to everyday stressors:

> For a while after that trip, when work stress started building up, I could sort of call back that feeling—that sense that this is all temporary, that there's this bigger world out there that just keeps going.

The participant's account suggested that immersive nature experiences could serve as resources for psychological resilience, providing what might be understood as cognitive-emotional tools for managing stress and maintaining perspective during challenging periods. However, the participant noted that these perspective shifts appeared to attenuate over time without regular reinforcement through subsequent nature contact, suggesting the need for ongoing rather than one-time experiences to maintain these psychological benefits.

The participant also described these experiences as generating feelings of interconnection with the natural world that contrasted with their typical sense of separation from nature in urban daily life. This sense of connection appeared emotionally significant, described with language suggesting both belonging and dependence:

> In those moments, you remember you're part of this. Not above it, not separate from it, but connected. We need these places, these ecosystems.

This recognition of interconnection appeared to bridge psychological and environmental dimensions, representing both a subjective feeling state and a cognitive acknowledgment of ecological relationships. The participant seemed to experience this awareness as both comforting, providing a sense of belonging to something larger than individual existence, and sobering, highlighting human vulnerability and dependency on functioning ecosystems.

3.3 Theme 3: The Disconnect Between Environmental Values and Action

Despite articulating strong environmental values and expressing concern about ecological degradation, the participant simultaneously described gaps between these values and their behavioral choices. This disconnect generated apparent psychological tension that the participant found difficult to resolve:

> I care deeply about these issues. Climate change terrifies me. The loss of species, the destruction of habitats—it feels like a tragedy. But then I look at my own life and I'm still driving to work, still consuming things I don't really need, still living in ways that contribute to exactly what I'm worried about. There's this cognitive dissonance that's honestly uncomfortable.

The participant identified several perceived barriers maintaining this gap despite environmental concern. Structural constraints of daily life, such as transportation infrastructure and work requirements, appeared to limit behavioral options. Social norms regarding consumption and convenience created pressures toward environmentally problematic behaviors. The psychological distance between individual actions and environmental outcomes made connections between personal choices and ecological impacts feel abstract rather than immediate. The participant experienced this situation not as indifference but as a source of guilt and frustration that itself became psychologically burdensome:

> It's like I'm part of the problem even though I don't want to be. And knowing that makes the problem worse because now I'm also dealing with feeling guilty, which is exhausting, but the guilt doesn't actually change the behavior consistently.

Notably, the participant suggested that their nature experiences sometimes intensified this psychological tension rather than resolving it. Moments of connection with natural environments could highlight the severity of environmental degradation and the preciousness of what might be lost, making the participant more acutely aware of the gap between their values and actions:

> When I'm hiking in a beautiful forest, I sometimes think about how many places like this have been lost, how many more are threatened. And then I think about my own contribution to that loss, even indirectly, and it feels heavy.

This theme revealed complexity in relationships between nature experiences and environmental behavior that might not be captured by models assuming straightforward pathways from nature contact through positive attitudes to pro-environmental action. While the participant's nature contact appeared to reinforce their environmental values and concern, making ecological issues feel more immediate and emotionally salient, this heightened concern did not automatically translate into consistent behavioral change. The participant acknowledged hoping that future nature experiences might help motivate more substantial behavioral shifts, but they also recognized limitations of individual action in addressing systemic environmental problems, a recognition that appeared to contribute to their psychological distress.

3.4 Theme 4: Nature Connection as Moral Motivation

Despite the behavioral inconsistencies described in the previous theme, the participant identified ways that their ongoing nature experiences influenced environmental attitudes and motivated certain conservation-oriented actions. This motivational influence seemed to operate through emotional rather than purely rational pathways:

> I'm not logical about it, I'll admit. Like, I know intellectually that one individual changing their behavior isn't going to solve climate change. But I also can't not care. When I think about those places I love—the beaches where I spent summers

> as a kid, the mountains where I've had those profound experiences—I want them to still be there.

This motivation appeared grounded in what the participant described as a form of care or even love for specific natural places and the more abstract notion of wild nature generally. The participant acknowledged that these feelings might not be entirely rational from a consequentialist perspective focused on measurable impact, but they experienced them as genuine and morally significant nonetheless:

> There's something about spending time in nature that makes you want to protect it. Not in an abstract way, but personally. These places become meaningful to you. You develop relationships with them, almost. And when you care about something, you want to see it preserved.

The participant linked this emotional investment to specific behavioral choices, even while acknowledging their limited scope. They described selecting products with environmental certifications when available, contributing financially to conservation organizations, and advocating for environmental policies in political contexts. The participant attributed these actions at least partly to their ongoing nature experiences rather than purely to abstract environmental ethics:

> Would I do these things if I didn't have those experiences, if I wasn't regularly getting out into natural areas? Honestly, I'm not sure. I think the direct contact keeps it real for me, keeps it from being just an abstract issue.

The emotional connection fostered through nature contact appeared to sustain environmental motivation even when structural barriers prevented more extensive behavioral change. This suggested that personal experiences might serve as counterweight to the psychological distance and abstraction that might otherwise characterize environmental issues encountered primarily through media coverage or scientific reports. However, the participant also expressed ambivalence about whether their individual actions constituted meaningful contribution to environmental protection or merely served to alleviate guilt about their own complicity in environmental degradation. This uncertainty appeared to create additional psychological complexity, with conservation behaviors potentially functioning simultaneously as genuine expressions of environmental concern and as coping mechanisms for managing distress associated with ecological crisis.

3.5 Relationships Among Themes

The four themes demonstrated important interconnections suggesting that nature experiences operated through multiple pathways rather than single mechanisms. Cognitive restoration described in Theme 1 and perspective transformation described in Theme 2 both contributed to overall psychological wellbeing the participant associated with nature experiences. These wellbeing benefits might, in turn, make nature experiences emotionally valued in ways that support

the moral motivation described in Theme 4, creating feedback loops reinforcing continued nature engagement.

However, the disconnect between values and action described in Theme 3 complicated any straightforward pathway from nature experiences through wellbeing to environmental behaviour. The participant's account revealed that psychological impacts of nature contact might be simultaneously beneficial for individual wellbeing yet potentially insufficient for generating comprehensive behavioural change, at least without complementary changes in structural conditions and social systems. This complexity highlights the importance of attending to both the positive psychological dimensions of nature experiences and the barriers that constrain translation of environmental concern into consistent action.

PART IV

EVALUATION

4

DISCUSSION

This analysis revealed that one individual's understanding of how nature experiences influenced psychological wellbeing and environmental attitudes involved multiple dimensions operating both independently and in interaction. The participant's narrative suggested that nature contact provided immediate cognitive-emotional benefits and contributed to longer-term shifts in environmental perspective and motivation, while also highlighting tensions between environmental values and behavioral realities that nature experiences alone appeared unable to resolve.

These findings resonate with existing research documenting relationships between nature exposure and mental health outcomes (Bratman et al., 2019), attention restoration (Kaplan, 1995), and pro-environmental behavior (Soga & Gaston, 2023). However, the qualitative analysis revealed subjective dimensions that quantitative studies may not fully capture, particularly regarding the participant's experience of psychological tension between environmental values and actions, and the complex, sometimes ambivalent ways that nature experiences appeared to influence environmental motivation. The theme of disconnection between values and behaviors adds nuance to research examining relationships between nature contact and pro-environmental action, suggesting that these relationships may be mediated by structural and psychological factors that deserve greater attention.

The cognitive restoration theme aligns with attention restoration theory (Kaplan, 1995), though the participant's experiential account provides texture regarding how this restoration feels subjectively and what specific features of nature might contribute to restorative effects. The perspective transformation theme extends research on nature experiences and psychological wellbeing by highlighting how certain encounters might produce lasting cognitive-emotional resources for managing stress, though the participant's observation that these effects attenuate without reinforcement suggests the importance of regular rather than occasional nature contact.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. As single-case analysis, findings reflect one individual's particular experiences and sense-making processes, limiting generalizability to broader populations. The participant's demographic characteristics as urban professional with discretionary time and resources for nature recreation may shape their experiences in ways differing from individuals with different social locations or access to natural environments. The interview method relied on retrospective reflection and verbal articulation, which may not fully capture pre-reflective dimensions of experience or non-verbal forms of knowing. My own relationship with nature and assumptions about its psychological significance likely influenced both the in-

terview process and analytical interpretations, though I maintained reflexive awareness of these influences throughout analysis.

The findings may hold implications for environmental psychology and public health approaches to promoting both wellbeing and environmental stewardship. The participant's account suggested that nature experiences might contribute to multiple outcomes simultaneously, including cognitive restoration, emotional wellbeing, perspective shifts, and environmental motivation, implying that policies supporting equitable nature access could serve diverse individual and societal goals. However, the disconnect between environmental values and behaviors suggests that nature experiences alone may be insufficient for generating substantial behavioral change without addressing structural barriers, including transportation infrastructure, urban design, economic systems, and social norms that constrain pro-environmental action even among concerned individuals.

This analysis demonstrates the value of qualitative approaches for understanding subjective dimensions of human-nature relationships that complement quantitative research on nature exposure and wellbeing. While themes identified here emerged from one individual's account, they suggest patterns that might be explored with larger, more diverse samples through further qualitative or mixed-methods research. The psychological impacts of nature experiences appear to be neither simple nor uniform, instead involving multiple pathways and outcomes that warrant continued investigation through methods honouring both individual particularity and broader patterns across populations and contexts.

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