

Clayton, S. and Opatow, S. *Identity and the Natural Environment: The psychological significance of nature*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.  
Reviewed for *Worldviews* 2006

This edited collection by Susan Clayton and Susan Opatow brings together some fascinating papers on the role of nature (or aspects thereof) in the development of psychological identity.

The importance of the questions addressed in this volume stems from the now well established idea that a change in our behaviour towards the environment will not come about through knowledge of environmental problems or even necessarily through direct contact with the effects of, for example, pollution, but requires some kind of environmental aspect to our identity. How that environmental/ecological/caring for nature aspect takes shape and is nurtured, or not, in various social contexts is extensively investigated throughout the various papers. Although the predominant discipline of the contributors is psychology, a range of other disciplines are also brought to bear on the questions and the text is certainly accessible to non-psychologists.

The book is organised into three parts: the first focuses on how individuals experience nature; the second on how we experience nature in social and community contexts; and the third on how we as social groups experience nature. The interlocking nature of these three components in environmental identity is never far from the surface, but the division is helpful in foregrounding each for examination.

The first part contains a very useful introductory paper by the editors that helps to begin the task of defining such complex terms as 'identity' and 'nature' and presents a helpful overview of the work that has been going on in many sub-disciplines concerning identity. This definitional work is continued in Clayton's paper in which she draws out three factors that emerge as desirable aspects of personal identity - autonomy, relatedness and competence - and shows how nature can provide the background within which these aspects can be expressed and developed. This section also includes the book's three papers on children's environmental identity. All are interesting and helpful additions to the field, but for me, the outstanding paper is by Gebhard, Nevers and Billmann-Mahecha on 'Moralizing Trees'. Their research is beautifully designed, employing a large sample size and a qualitative approach using children's discussions of a 'micro-moral' story, and issues in an elucidating analysis of the findings. The paper not only establishes the age at which children cease to anthropomorphise natural entities, but goes on to discuss the ethical implications of anthropomorphism. They show, for example, the way that the children make an age-dependent transition from caring about an individual tree (not harming it in order to build a tree house) to caring about their social networks and friends and the affordance of socialising opportunities (building the tree house). This transition starts to resonate profoundly as one reads further into sections two and three of this book.

The second section of the book, which focuses on how we experience nature in social and community contexts, is a rather mixed bag both in the topics covered and their treatment. The strongest aspects of these papers are the detailed accounts of practical projects and their impact on identity. Sommer's paper on trees and human identity is excellent when it brings out the heartfelt significance of trees to a local community and the reciprocal nature of community building and local involvement in tree planting. The paper demonstrates less sure handling when it delves into more theoretical matters and we read condensed statements such as "...phenomenological discussions of trees rely heavily on metaphor" (195), and, later the claim that "ecopsychology maintains that the planet Earth is a single living organism and there should be no distinction between living and non-living matter" (198). Austin and Kaplan's paper on tree-planting projects continues the theme of identity and community building and is a very useful guide to what works and why it works. Like Sommer's paper, it is enriched with direct quotations from participants that endorse the relationship between identity and positive action. In fact the efficacy of these kinds of projects is underlined by a warning about the devastating consequences for personal and community identity when they fail. As Austin and Kaplan say, "To focus solely on projects that work or are successful is as dangerous as it is irresponsible. The powerful effect of a project that falls short of the mark provides ample evidence that these ventures should not be undertaken lightly" (223). Another paper in this section that contains very interesting findings is by Linneweber, Hartmuth and Fritsche who interviewed people on the North Sea island of Sylt (an island that is shrinking and experiencing more storms due to global climate change). What they discovered is that the islanders' environmental concerns are dominated by local issues even though they are aware of the impact of global issues.

The final section of the book covers experiencing nature as members of social groups and is consistently of a very high quality. All the papers report on well designed research projects and all emerge with significant findings. Opatow and Brook's study of ranchers and non-ranchers living on rangeland really opens up the concept of environmental identity by showing its differing interpretations between the two groups as well as how those identities are formed and reinforced within groups. The enhanced definition of self and 'own group' via the creation of a disparaged 'out group' is clear, and when both groups claim to be the environmentalists and the other to be anti-environmental it is also clear how conflicts can become entrenched and even win-win type solutions are of no interest. As they say, "... part of the 'real interests' of the parties in conflict is to protect their dignity in the face of perceived disrespect, derogation and moral exclusion as much as to maintain control of a resource they see as crucial to their well being" (267). On a more positive note Samuelson, Peterson and Putnam give an excellent account of conflict resolution actually working. Their diagram (274) of the conceptual framework for the relationships between knowledge, group identity and action is helpful and sets the scene for their account of how positions can become entrenched and also how they can be freed up to form a kind of meta-group identity in which different voices can be heard and in which groups holding opposing views can learn together and move, albeit slowly, towards a consensus. Zavestoski

addresses the problem of how the environment can have an impact on self-identity given that self-identity is understood to be formed largely by social reactions (or our anticipations of them) to our behaviour. Although the very freedom that nature allows, thus helping us towards autonomy (Clayton), would seem to discount reactions, for Zavestoski we can anticipate the reactions of the environment to our behaviour and it is this personalising of nature or expansion of self that he sees taking place in the identities of deep ecologists. He then examines the responses of people taking part in a two week deep ecology retreat and it emerges that even they have problems maintaining their ecological identity when back in the “real world”. The strategies employed show the importance of social reinforcement of that part of their identity. The final paper, by Kempton and Holland, helps to demonstrate the interplay between group membership, identity and action. They show that far from there being some set causal route that ends in taking part in environmental action, the three factors are “mutually causal, more akin to positive feedback” (339). In fact many of their sample began by taking action in regard to a local problem as the starting point for their development of an environmental identity.

The book as a whole is excellent. It brings together a range of studies and they are, in the main, written in a clear and helpful style such that students from a range of disciplines could get a lot from the book. All the papers are well referenced and one could use this book to get an overview of this developing field as well as many indications of things to follow up. Also the range of methods presented could be used as a guide for undertaking this kind of research. The clear message of the text is that a change in attitude or behaviour towards the environment will not come about if it does not chime with our personal and social identity and that uncovering the ways in which an environmental aspect of our identity can be nourished is both complex to understand but also remarkably simple to set in train, for example, we could just do something and see where it leads.

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