

# Healing the Divide: Breaking the Boundaries between Humans and Nature

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What happens when we perceive ourselves either as separate from or as a part of nature? Where our society stands, we already consider ourselves as separate from nature. For the vast majority of history, humans have acted as conquerors of nature, clearing the land for whatever reason they chose. Even now, we clear cut forests for timber, destroying old growth ecosystems for fleeting human habitation. Modern mining practices include mountaintop-removal mining, which literally obliterates a mountain into a valley of rubble. The earth has spent 4.6 billion years developing these unique ecosystems; we do not have the right to destroy them.

We consider ourselves as morally superior to animals with little responsibility for their welfare. The early hunting culture in America consisted of killing as many individuals as possible. There are dozens of old photos depicting hunters and fishers with their take of thousands of animals. Images of hunters standing in front of a mountain of bison skulls, gleefully showing their kills. Grey wolves in North America, a keystone species, have been hunted nearly to extinction through government-sanctioned wolf eradication programs. A few fishermen showing off their catch of thousands, way more than could be consumed. These images are horrifying to our eyes today because we are realizing these actions were wrong. This type of hunting has directly led to the extinction of many species. However, we are slowly finding our place within nature. The Anti-Cruelty Society and other animal rights groups

show that society's morals surrounding animals and nature can change and are changing.

Our moral separation from nature has led to the mismanagement of natural resources. We hunt, mine, and log without studying the impacts of extraction methods nor the results of reduced animal populations. The worldwide fishing industry is a perfect example; our world's oceans have been overfished for generations. Many popular fish species have been fished to endangerment or extinction. Over the course of the twentieth century, we have devoured our way down the list of popular fish, marketing less desirable fish when more delicious fish populations have been depleted. Catch limits must be enacted to help current target fish species return to sustainable populations. While some threatened or endangered fish species may rebound, other decimated populations may never recover.

When we consider ourselves a part of nature, human society can intertwine with nature rather than conquer it. Our place in the world is alongside nature while using it in a way that works with nature. We can learn from the natural world and model our societies after environmental systems. We could create a human ecosystem that cycles products and energy rather than directional flow to the trash heap.

Products come and go in our society, eventually becoming trash. This trash is merely transported away from us so we don't have to deal with it anymore. However, we can change this trash line into a recycling circle by studying how nature deals with "waste."

A natural ecosystem is an intricate web of cycles and relationships between organisms and their environment. When ecosystems are healthy, energy and nutrients flow through the system without being lost. At every point in the food web, the waste from one organism is used by another. When plants and animals die, decomposing organisms eat the remains, breaking down the molecules through digestion. These small, organic molecules allow plants to flourish. Everything that one organism deems “trash” becomes resources for other organisms; nothing is waste. The prey that the predator doesn’t eat is consumed by other animals and insects. The food that we don’t eat goes to the dump where it decomposes but is locked away from the rest of the environment, remaining useless for future growth. To truly be part of nature, human society must operate in a way that also cycles energy without releasing destructive pollutants into our surrounding nature.

Our society has much to gain if we truly learn from nature and emulate its systems. To do this, we have to work with nature’s processes rather than against them. When we combine nature’s lessons and human technology, we can develop better methods for old practices. Crops can be grown in mixed fields that produce a variety of crops while increasing biodiversity of farmland. Resources such as animals, fish, wood, and minerals can be harvested in a way that minimally impacts the ecosystem. Greenhouses and buildings can use natural airflow and sunlight to heat, cool, and illuminate themselves. Electricity can be generated by renewable sources such as wind, solar, and geothermal. Organic waste can be composted into fertilizer for agricultural systems. Organic waste can also be composted using anaerobic digestion to capture methane for fuel. Neighborhoods could use green roofs and community gardens to grow most of their own food. When we connect our society with nature, both human and ecological cycles can flourish.

When we view ourselves as completely separate from nature, we build barriers and create divisions seen nowhere in the natural realm. We divide ourselves from nature, isolated from the elements. Since the beginning of humanity, we have always split social groups into “us” and “them.” This is the default mindset when we look at nature as well; we view ourselves as “us” and all of nature as “them.” We believe we are different from the other inhabitants of earth. We enjoy human-made comforts like homes and buildings. Streets and buildings are hard delineations; these

physical barriers further separate humanity from nature and create boundaries that would not otherwise exist. This separation has been useful to humans: if we are not one with nature, we can be the masters of nature and use all of its resources for our pleasure. But, when we do this, our humanity changes; the way we view animals and plants changes. When we think in terms of strict separations, the world becomes a very precise and technical thing, instead of the complex intertwined system it really is.

When we view ourselves as a part of nature, we see the similarities between humans and nature. We are human beings; we are made of flesh and bone, of carbon and other elements, just like every other living thing on the planet. Biologically, we are no different from nature. All of the separation we experience, we have created. If we embrace our natural roots and an ecologically friendly outlook, we see that we can live and thrive in nature as other animals have. We would realize every one of our actions has a consequence and therefore act responsibly and respectfully toward nature. Viewing ourselves as a part of nature would mean knocking down the artificial boundaries we have imposed on ourselves and nature, allowing species to interact like they would have without human interference. It would help restore ecosystems and allow for a more circular system.

Being part of nature means working toward a healthy, diverse world ecosystem. Viewing ourselves as separate from nature has proved disastrous for both humans and nature. The way we have depleted the planet’s resources and imposed unfair environmental conditions on the poorest of our people is unsustainable and unhealthy. While we may never view ourselves as completely separate or completely a part of nature, it is important to consider how we interact with and within nature. We must ponder how we can promote balance and health for all of earth’s creatures.

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