Two chinstrap penguins, Roy and Silo, longtime residents of the Central Park Zoo, have their own page on Wikipedia. They have distinguished themselves as the avian world’s most famous same-sex couple, not only having pair-bonded as far back as 1999, but having subsequently incubated an egg and raised a chick named Tango.

As a birder whose optics tend to focus west of the continental divide, I hesitate to make inferences about any behavior that originates in midtown Manhattan. However, I could not help but notice the sub-head to an article about Roy and Silo that appears on the Scientific American website. It reads, “Homosexual behavior is common in nature, and it plays an important role in survival.”

I understand that magazine sub-heads are often generated by editors more interested in drawing attention to a text than in assuring contextual accuracy. That said, I am bemused when an editor for Scientific American posits the claim that a given behavior “is common in nature” based upon observations of captive animals in an urban zoo. My point here is not to privilege nature outside a zoo environment over nature found within. However, the sub-head’s use of the concept “in nature” might lead us to question whether the designation is of any practical use. If nothing else, this usage calls for rigorous deconstruction.

As an exercise in deconstruction, I have posed the following riddle to students: The beaver builds its dam, and we call that “nature.” Humanity builds its dam, and we complain about the destruction of Nature. The coral polyp builds its reef, and we call that “nature.” Humanity builds its skyline, and we consider the resultant structure to be the very antithesis of Nature. If all life modifies its context—and it does—then how is it antithetical to nature when the species Homo sapiens constructs its artifacts?

The answer to this riddle, usually, is that “nature” itself is a human construct, a concept connoting the opposite of “culture” by referring to those sectors of the biosphere that seem least affected by human design. Recognizing the construct for what it is becomes the first step in deconstructing our relationship with an environment we co-inhabit with other species.

What I’ve noticed among my students is that once we’ve deconstructed “nature,” they become reluctant to use the term altogether. They find themselves struggling to articulate alternatives such as “the natural landscape,” or “the biotic world” or perhaps even “the biosphere.” These phrases, unfortunately, become euphemisms for the construct they are trying to avoid, and we come full circle, describing “the natural world” as a world to which humanity does not seem to belong.

As a first step, this is not all bad. It seems important to me that my students understand the environmental cost of describing nature in such a way that it becomes “the other” to which they have no ontological affiliation. When nature and culture are viewed as binary opposites, humanity inevitably begins to subscribe to meta-narratives about ourselves in which our very being is perceived as superior to that of the natural world. This, in turn, means that our conspecific needs take precedence over whatever needs we might perceive other species to have. One example of such a meta-narrative is the story that tells us that we’ve been created in the image and likeness of God.

In all fairness, one must admit that it has been hypothetically possible to subscribe to such meta-narratives and at the same time to conceptualize a theoretical foundation for environmental concern. For example, those who view themselves as having been modeled after God, and who therefore consider themselves to enjoy a proprietary relationship to...
other creatures, often conceive of each other as being environmental “stewards.” In this role, like any good steward, they manage the lord’s estate in his absence. Espousing such a numinous theory is probably better than subscribing to no environmental ethic whatsoever.

Regardless of all the deconstruction, it seems that we still need a concept of nature, which is to say that such a concept might still be useful in helping us to understand our species’ relationship with the rest of the biosphere. The problem, as has been pointed out by environmental historian Donald Worster, is that “We realize more than ever that shifting attitudes toward the natural world are to some degree the product of [a] complex dialectic: as material conditions change, that which is called ‘nature’ disappears and its place is taken by a new construct.” According to Worster, the constructs from which we’ve moved away include “romantic assumptions about a static world of unspoiled nature.” This is good, in my opinion, because clinging to such romantic assumptions can lead to apocalyptic environmental rhetoric such as that found in Bill McKibben’s classic book, *The End of Nature*, which overlooks the basic fact that all life, even human life, modifies its context. Nature does not come to an end merely because the chemical content of the atmosphere changes as the result of human activity; nature evolves, just as all its constituent elements evolve.

Environmental discourse not only constructs nature, but sometimes misconstrues it as well. Classic examples of this are appeals to save the Earth. Few thinkers engaged in this trope stop to consider that the Earth is not in need of salvation, however loosely the salvation metaphor is defined, and that regardless of whether *Homo sapiens* survives the Anthropocene epoch, planet Earth will continue to function as a celestial body. Indeed, it seems to represent the ultimate in hubris that we humans might consider ourselves capable of saving a planet that without our assistance has maintained its orbit for four and a half billion years. We would all do well to remind ourselves to enter into environmental discourse with greater humility by keeping sight of geologian Thomas Berry’s dictum that “the Earth is primary, the human is derivative.”

Part of the problem with analyzing environmental rhetoric at present is that so much of the conversation leans toward the apocalyptic rather than the philosphic. An example of this can be found in the editor’s introduction of *Granta* magazine’s issue on “The New Nature Writing,” where Jason Cowley concludes, “At present, the human animal lives in but often strives to be apart from nature. None of us wishes to imagine what might come after nature, when we are gone.” Is the implication here that nature will cease to exist at the point the human species ceases to exist? Could such a grossly anthropocentric argument possibly be what the author intended? Probably not. But the only way to make philosophical sense out of this sentence is to hope that the author was referring to the linguistic signifier, “nature,” and not its common referent. This does not seem to be the point, however; Cowley’s intention was no doubt merely to add rhetorical weight to his introduction by ending it with an apocalyptic thunderclap. Even with that understanding, the confusion that results from reading his final sentence is a perfect example of the need to resituate the nature construct, and to do so quickly, before our conversations relating to the natural world devolve into babble.

One alternative recently espoused by literary theorist Timothy Morton in his book, *Ecology Without Nature*, is to rid ourselves of the concept of nature altogether. Morton posits that the nature construct is actually an obstruction to environmental thought, saying that “to contemplate deep green ideas deeply is to let go of the idea of Nature, the one thing that maintains an aesthetic distance between us and them, us and it, us and ‘over there.’” While Morton proposes to “analyze possible ways of thinking the same idea bigger, wider, or better under the general heading of ‘ambiance,’” his analysis becomes so distracted by de-
construction of the Romantic impulse that it becomes too cynical for constructive use within general environmental discourse. As a result, the term “ambiance” becomes little more than a metonym for the very term “nature” that Morton finds problematic.

An argument against abandoning the concept of nature can be found in Kate Soper’s book, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-human*, where she makes this point: “For while it is true that much of what we refer to as ‘natural’ is a ‘cultural construct’ in the sense that it has acquired its form as a consequence of human activity, that activity does not ‘construct’ the powers and processes upon which it is dependent for its operation.” What may prove to be valuable about Soper’s approach is that it raises the possibility of focusing more on nature as process than as thing; it seems that the more we reify nature the less useful the concept becomes, both eco-critically and ecologically.

When we make a theoretical shift to consider nature as process rather than as thing, we are in essence reconstructing rather than deconstructing. I find myself uncomfortable with the term “reconstruction,” however, because it could be interpreted as a process of undoing deconstruction, which is not in any way my intent, at least not from the perspective of suggesting that deconstruction is necessarily a destructive process. There are certainly those who posit that deconstruction is counterproductive to environmental discourse, as has been suggested in the anthology *Reinventing Nature: Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*. This, however, is not my position. For this reason, I have borrowed the verb “to resituate” from D.M. Boje’s work in narrative analysis. As I understand it, Boje’s system is to resituate a story as the final stage in the process of deconstruction. The idea is to “reauthor” the story outside of its constructed hierarchies in such a way as to eliminate dualities. Boje claims that in a resituated story, there are no more centers, so that the story is free to script new actions.

This sort of resitution is exemplified by those who have turned to Eastern, especially Taoist, conceptions of nature in an attempt to resituate the nature construct outside of the body/soul dualism that Western civilization has inherited from its Hellenistic roots. The attraction here is the concept of *chi*, which is conceived as flowing through all life and therefore providing, theoretically, a continuity of being. In short, Eastern philosophical systems tend to concentrate on that which unifies humanity with the rest of nature, while Western systems are far more preoccupied with those elements, such as language, that distinguish *Homo sapiens* from other species.

A possible solution to dualistic ways of constructing nature is to move toward redefining nature as being primarily an aesthetic construct. Nature could become, ultimately, the network of perceptions that provoke biophilia, which E.O. Wilson defines somewhat coldly as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes.” There is a subtle difference between this aesthetic and the Romantic aesthetic that connected nature with the sublime. The eco-critical shortfall of the Romantic aesthetic is that it tended to devalue elements of the ecosystem that were more commonplace. The result of this, historically, has been that we’d fall all over ourselves to preserve a landscape such as Yosemite while we couldn’t be bothered for a moment to worry about the salt industry’s conversion of pickleweed marsh into evaporation ponds. Conversely, the strength of nature as a network of perceptions that provoke biophilia is that this aesthetic would promote a more ecological type of thinking in which nature would be understood in terms of relationships and processes, rather than as a thing.

Ultimately, I can think of nothing more important, as we go about the process of resituating nature, than to avoid its reification. Nature is not a thing. The more we understand fully deconstructed and resituated nature, the more we will understand that nature is also not a commodity. As such, it can neither be destroyed or preserved. In positing this, I recall a sign I saw out-
has disclosed that fundamentally Nature is inflexible and demands conformity. Notice that in this usage, even though it reifies nature to the point that each instance of the term in the passage above requires capitalization, Nature is perceived as a force, a moral imperative, that will demand conformity with its dictates. What I fear is that in 2050, at the point when average global temperatures have risen high enough over pre-industrial levels that dust bowls will encloud whole nations, nature will be viewed as a thing of the past—a dim memory of how things should have been. At that point, nature will have devolved into nothing more than a rhetorical tool delineating what is politically desirable from what is not, and the nature/culture dualism that is at the root of so much environmentally destructive thinking will be given new power.

There are alternatives. When we resituate nature, especially as aesthetic, we must strive to situate it within the economics of an ecology informed by Darwin. This is not as easy as it sounds because, as a beginning point in doing so, we must refuse to conceptualize nature independently of place. In other words, nature is not merely appreciation of the working composite of organisms that we might consider abstractly. Rather, nature is situated within a system of ecological niches populated by species working to ensure their own survival. Thus, we must foster the notion not only that the natural world is imperfect, but that it resists the stasis of perfection. It is always a place of competition, evolution, disorder, and change. The nature aesthetic should embrace this disorder, especially by refusing to serve as a construct for political ends beyond aesthetics. It must become equally as wrong to argue that homosexual behavior is unnatural because nature intended us to go forth and multiply as it is to argue that homosexual behavior is acceptable because chinstrap penguins engage in such behavior out there in nature.

This is all theory of course, and we must recognize the limits of any theoretical exercise. For my part,
while proposing a theoretical resituation of nature, I am troubled by Wittgenstein’s assertion that the philosopher’s task is to observe how a term is used in ordinary language, rather than to prescribe abstract meaning. Pursuant to that concern, over the past year I’ve programmed a meta-news site to report any article written in English, worldwide, that includes the term “nature” in its title. This exercise has been alternately entertaining and discouraging thanks to headlines that suggest ways to make nature “more real,” or how gadgets are making it more difficult for kids to discover nature. On the one hand, I find myself agreeing with Hume, who wrote that there is no more “ambiguous and equivocal” term than “nature.” At the same time, I find myself intrigued by William Cronon’s observation that nature is “the meeting place between the world ‘out there’ and the culturally constructed ideas and beliefs and values we project onto that world.” The problem here is that Cronon’s distinction does not yet answer the question of how we might achieve harmony with nature if at the same time we still consider ourselves to exist metaphysically outside of it. We will only be able to resolve that question when we resituate nature outside of dualities with culture.

In resituating nature as aesthetic we should always remember that we do not have to use the word “nature” in order to be talking about nature. Words such as “desert” or “forest” can be equally and similarly confusing. If you live in downtown Phoenix, Arizona, do you live in the desert? If not, at what point did the landscape in which you live stop being desert? When I look out the window of my high-rise apartment and see thousands and thousands of trees below me, am I gazing at a forest? Even though I live within the city limits?

How we answer these questions may correlate with our willingness to resituate nature.