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Review: Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature

By Susan Clayton and Susan Opotow (Eds.)

Reviewed by [Pramod K. Nayar](#)
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Susan Clayton and Susan Opotow (Eds.). *Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2003. 353 pp. ISBN 0-262-53206-9 (pbk) US \$ 29.00

The Clayton-Opotow volume is a useful primer on identity and the environment. Since both "identity" and "nature" are slippery terms, the introduction sets out their parameters. Personal identity emerges in a social context that includes interpersonal and group memberships. Thus identity has a cultural and social aspect. The experience of nature is rooted in a social and cultural experience. Environmental identity can be conceptualized as occurring along a continuum. *Identity and the Natural Environment* is divided into sections based on the *degree* of social influence on environmental identity, ranging from the minimal to the strong.

Steven J. Holmes in the opening essay surveys the available literature/theories on identity and the natural environment. The first section of the book deals with a minimal degree of social influence, and is therefore titled "Experiencing Nature as Individuals." Susan Clayton's essay defines environmental identity as a meaningful source of self-definition. Her research findings demonstrate conclusively that environmental identity relates to values, attitudes and behaviors. Gene Myers and Ann Russell examine the human-natural interactions that produce an environmental identity. Ulrich Gebhard et al analyze how children use human identity to construct an anthropomorphic identity for natural objects. They demonstrate how such a construction of identity – interpreting human identity in terms of nature or natural objects, what they term "physiomorphism" (as opposed to "anthropomorphism") – enables children to develop a form of empathy with nature. Peter Kahn, Jr. comes to a similar conclusion in his research on children and the environment, arguing that children use either anthropocentric or biocentric ways to think about the non-human environment. He suggests that environmental identity must be talked about in terms of both multiplicity and unity. Elisabeth Kals and Heidi Ittner also focus on children, specifically their motives for nature-protective behavior. They conclude that nature-protective behavior in children stems from a combination of emotional attachment to nature and moral concern about

threats to nature.

In Section II of the book, the essays deal with moderate social influence on environmental identity. Focusing on social and community contexts, the essays in this section research the concerns about environmental justice constructed at local levels. Linda Kalof looks at the ways in which humans think about animals, locating such attitudes within the matrix of race and ethnicity. Robert Sommer presents five theoretical approaches—Darwinian, depth psychology, phenomenological, affordance theory, and ecopsychology—to tree-human relationships, based on identity effects of trees (physical, aesthetic, economic, social and psychological). Maureen Austin and Rachel Kaplan look at people involved in tree-planting programs. Volker Linneweber et al explore the perceptions of environmental issues in a threatened coastal zone and discover that this awareness is based on the social position of the individual.

The essays in Section III deal with environmental identity defined within a strongly social context. Susan Opatow and Amara Brook look at rangeland conflicts. Interviewing numerous landowners and ranchers, they demonstrate how social and environmental identities polarize ranchers and nonranchers, and the resultant social tensions that arise from the conflict. Charles D. Samuelson et al focus on water disputes, seeing group identity as “generative.” Exploring public participation in watershed restoration projects, they argue that a more democratic approach and increased communication enable a greater environmental identity based on a concern for the natural resource. Stephen Zavestoski, with his definition of “ecological identity”—a set of cognitions that allow us to anticipate the environmental consequences of our actions—turns to deep ecology activists to explore how environmental identity is rooted in both social interaction and human-nonhuman interaction. Willett Kempton and Dorothy Holland look at action-based environment identity formation.

As conclusion, we return to the introduction where Clayton and Opatow summarize the “essential” emphases of the various essays: that pro-environmental action is facilitated when individuals perceive nature as a moral entity rather than just a “resource”, and that pro-environmental action is facilitated when social environments are designed to nurture a feeling of connectedness with nature and when social contexts support pro-environmental identities.

Identity and the Natural Environment is just the right mix of empirical research, statistics and theory for a student of environmental aesthetics, ethics and social dynamics. The movement between ecological moralism and political activism between essays is actually a useful index of the varied

nature of the environmental movement. Focusing on social interaction enables the volume to show the linkage of democratic decision-making, political activism and the environment. An environmental psychology, one concludes, is rarely an individual "condition" – it is social and cultural.

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