***How Nature Matters: Culture, Identity, and Environmental Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)**

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Introduction

Picture a wide brown river flanked by thick tropical forest. Picture tree roots poking through banks of rich red mud, like splayed fingers reaching down into the water. Add some animals—a few macaws in the branches, a caiman drifting downstream. As we'll see later, talk of what is *natural* is often frowned upon; but, for want of a better word, let us stick with it for now. The river, the trees, the macaws—let's call these natural entities.

Do any of those entities matter? Well, yes—even those who deny any interest in environmental issues would admit that some of them matter. Even the most committed anti-environmentalist would admit that some parts of the rainforest matter, if only because they are good for us humans and because *we* matter. And on this point, at least, the anti-environmentalist would be right. The river, the trees, the macaws—such entities really are good for us humans: they really do contribute to our well-being. This is not simply because they can be dammed, felled, or shot for their feathers; for they contribute to our well-being even when they are left untouched. As ecological economists like to say, rainforests supply us humans with medicines, food, pollinators for crops, protection from floods, and various other 'ecosystem services'.

Not all natural entities are good for us, of course, and those that are good for us might not be good for us all the time. (A river, for instance, might provide fish on Tuesday but none on Wednesday.) Moreover, some natural entities might be good for us in some respects but bad in others. They might have 'disvalue' for us to the extent that they detract from our well-being. (On Thursday, that river might burst its banks and flood one's home.) Furthermore, what value natural entities have does not entirely depend on the contributions they make to human well-being. On the contrary, many such entities are valuable for their own sakes. Nonetheless, though I say a little about the topic of disvalue in Chapter 6 and a lot about the topic of intrinsic value in Chapter 9, my main goal in this book is to consider the contributions so-called natural entities make to human well-being. I argue that we must transform how we think about those contributions, if we are to understand how nature matters.

According to what I will call the standard view, nature's contributions to human well-being can be understood in terms of the concepts of *instrumentality* and *causation*. It is assumed that when some natural entity benefits us humans, it has instrumental value for us. It is assumed that the entity is a means that brings about—that is, causes—the valuable end of increasing our well-being. And it is assumed that this instrumental value can be compared with whatever other sorts of instrumental value the entity has for us. This is the assumption underlying the notion of an ecosystem service, for instance. For those who like to think in

such terms, nature provides us humans not just with 'material' ecosystem services such as flood protection and carbon sequestration, but with 'cultural' ones, too.[1]

As I will try to show, when people in environmental organizations seek to understand nature's contributions to human well-being, they tend to do so in this way. Whether or not they adopt the ecosystem services approach, they tend to think in terms of causation and instrumentality. However, as I will also try to show, this *means-end model* is severely limited. If we are fully to understand nature's contributions to well-being, we must, I will contend, give up our twin preoccupations with causation and instrumentality and start thinking in terms of meaning and part–whole relations—in terms, that is, of what I will call a *part–whole model*. We must come to see that natural entities can benefit us, not just as causally-efficient means to certain valuable ends, not just as resources and service-providers, but as parts of traditions, narratives, and cultural identities—as parts, that is, of various meaningful and valuable wholes.

In developing my argument, I will consider twelve case studies, concerning, amongst other things, the role of reindeer in Saami culture, the practice of dugong hunting in the Torres Strait, and the religious significance of the site where the Buddha is said to have become enlightened. I will also engage with several policy-focused debates about nature's value, such as the ongoing dispute surrounding the concepts of *relational value* and *nature's contributions to people*. But this book is about more than just ethics and policy. It is also a response to those writers, such as Steven Vogel and Bruno Latour, who argue that environmental thinkers should stop thinking in terms of what is natural and what isn't. So to say this book is about nature isn't merely to say that it is about the sorts of things that concern environmentalists. It is also to say that it is about the need to frame those concerns in terms of the concept of *nature*. In this sense, too, this book is about how nature matters.

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In this book, then, I present a new account of nature's value for us. But 'nature' and 'value' are slippery terms. So, before I present my argument, some clarifications are in order.

Begin with 'nature'. As just noted, there is a great deal of debate about whether one may justifiably talk about what is natural and what isn't. I engage with these debates in Chapter 8. In this introductory section, however, I will merely indicate, in a very rough and ready way, what I mean to refer to when I use the term.

Briefly stated, I use the term 'nature' to denote that which environmentalists characteristically seek to protect. There are of course other options. 'Earth', as in 'Friends of the Earth' or 'Earth First!', is one. Yet that term is potentially misleading, since it calls to mind the Planet Earth, and that thousand trillion tonnes of matter hurtling through space is not something that environmentalists characteristically seek to protect. A second option would be to use some phrase drawn from the biological science—to write of *biodiversity*, for instance, or of *ecosystems*. However, as I'll argue below, such terms often fail to capture what environmentalists characteristically seek to protect. Take the Trump Administration's 2017 decision to remove grizzly bears from the endangered species list, for example. Not all

[1] See, for instance, TEEB (The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity), *Mainstreaming the Economics of Nature: A Synthesis of the Approach, Conclusions and Recommendations of TEEB* (Bonn: UNEP, 2010), p. 34.

of those who objected to that decision did so merely because they wanted to maximize biodiversity, for example, or protect certain sorts of ecosystems. Some First Nation objectors, for instance, appealed to the bears' cultural and spiritual significance.[2]

A third option would be to use 'environment'. This word is employed in a wide variety of ways in discussions of environmental issues. It is sometimes used to refer to *the* Environment, a vast collective entity that is supposed to encompass everything from the summits of the world's highest peaks to the lightless depths of its deepest ocean trenches. In other cases it is used to denote the milieu in which some organism or group of organisms lives. In this sense, one can speak of multiple environments—mine, yours, or that of a grizzly bear. Whichever interpretation one adopts, though, environments often seem to contain quite a few things that environmentalists do *not* characteristically seek to protect. Electric lights, for example, are a prominent feature of many human and nonhuman environments, but there are no environmental campaigns to protect *them*. The scope of the term 'environment' needs to be restricted in some way, and an obvious way to do this is to say that environmentalists characteristically seek to protect *natural* environments—coral reefs, for instance, or old-growth forests, rather than hotel foyers and shopping malls. Using the term 'natural' in this way does not commit one to the dubious notion that naturalness is an on-off concept, such that any particular environment is either 100 per cent natural or not in the slightest bit natural at all. One can consistently suppose that naturalness admits of degrees and that, accordingly, an environment qualifies as natural to the extent that its present state is not the intended result of human actions. This is (roughly) what I suppose in what follows. So, for instance, I am happy to say that the Amazon rainforest is more natural than downtown Tokyo, even though much of its 5.5 million square kilometres has to some extent been shaped by human actions.[3] (That account of naturalness would not, I admit, be endorsed by all. Steven Vogel, for example, argues that to postulate a continuum between what is natural and what is not is to betray one's commitment to an outmoded dualistic metaphysics.[4] I engage with Vogel's argument, and various other expressions of nature-scepticism, in Chapter 8. I ask readers who have these sorts of concerns to set them aside until then.)

The phrase 'natural environments' does not quite capture what environmentalists characteristically seek to protect, however. It is true that environmentalists often take the protection of certain environments as their main goal; but there are exceptions. Reconsider those grizzlies. They are the sorts of things that environmentalists characteristically seek to protect. But although any particular bear provides an environment for various parasites and symbiotic microorganisms, those people who seek to protect grizzly bears do not usually see themselves as seeking to protect certain shambling, furry, and tick-harbouring environments. Their primary concern is to protect something that does not qualify as an environment: the individual subjects-of-lives we call bears, perhaps, or the species to which those individuals belong. Granted, to protect bears outside of zoos one must protect the environments to which

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[2] See, for instance, *The Grizzly: A Treaty of Cooperation, Cultural Revitalization and Restoration* (https://www.piikaninationtreaty.com/the-treaty).

[3] See further, Charles Mann, '1491', *The Atlantic Monthly* (March, 2000): 41–53.

[4] See Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), p. 24.

they are adapted; however, the goal of protecting those environments does not *replace* that of protecting the bears.

In many cases, then, environmentalists seek to protect things other than environments. For this reason, I say that this book is about natural *entities*, rather than just natural *environments*. And I use 'entities' in a broad way to denote not just organisms and things, but also systems, processes, and events.[5] So when I say that this book is about nature, I mean that it is about certain sorts of organisms (such as grizzly bears), certain sorts of inanimate things (such as mountains), certain sorts of processes (such as the water cycle) and certain sorts of events (such as the spring thaw).

So much, then, for 'nature'. What do I mean by nature's *value* for us? Like 'nature', 'value' has many different meanings. Used as a verb, it can mean to regard as good (as in 'I value your support'). More narrowly, it can connote measurement and, in many cases, pricing (as in 'I have taken Grandmother's ring to be valued'). Used as a noun, it can mean one's basic moral commitments (as in 'Capitalists and communists have different values'). It can also mean the goodness of something (as in 'Biodiversity is of immense value'). In this book, I will be primarily concerned with value in the last of these senses.

To say that nature has value *for us* is, I take it, to say that it has value because it contributes to a certain end that is not just near-universally valued but valuable—namely, human well-being. So to say that some natural entity has value for certain humans is, I will suppose, to say that the entity increases those humans' well-being (or at least prevents its decrease). In making these stipulations, I do not mean to deny that there are significant differences between humans of different genders, ethnicities, and so forth. On the contrary, the arguments I set out below presuppose that humanity is in various important respects diverse. Nor, in focusing on nature's value for us, do I mean to suggest that each and every natural entity, landslides and coronaviruses included, has value for us. Such entities can freeze us, burn us, hunt us, infest our homes, and infect our bodies—they can have disvalue for us to the extent that they detract from our well-being. This does not mean that the model I will present is limited, though. For, if it works, my model applies not just to those cases when nature has value for us but also to those when it has disvalue for us. Either way, I shall argue, we need to think not just in terms of causation and means–end relations, but also in terms of meanings and part–whole relations.

Value for us is, therefore, defined in terms of the concept of human well-being. And I will take well-being, for its part, to be synonymous with quality of life. To say that someone has high well-being is, I will suppose, to say that they are flourishing or living well, that their quality of life is high.

There is a great deal of disagreement amongst philosophers about what is involved in living well.[6] Some hold that it is simply a matter of feeling good or of getting what one wants. Others contend that more is involved. After all, they point out, some people who both

[5] E. J. Lowe, for one, adopts such a broad reading of 'entity'. In his view, '[a]nything that does or could exist is, it would seem, uncontroversially describable as an "entity" of some sort'. Clearly, organisms, things, systems, and processes count as entities on this reading of 'entity'. Lowe suggests that events count, too. (*A Survey of Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 15 and 216.)

[6] See further, Guy Fletcher, *The Philosophy of Well-being: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

feel good and seem to have got what they want have sub-optimal well-being. Picture a heroin addict, needle in arm, sinking back into warm oblivion.

There is also the difficult question of how living *well* might be related to living *morally*. Can the former be achieved without the latter? Could someone given to lying or stealing achieve full well-being? It depends what one means by well-being. If one means being content and having enough resources and power to get what one wants, then, sure, some manifestly immoral people seem to have achieved very high levels of well-being. But if one can't live well without living morally, if a good life must be a *morally* good life, then such individuals, for all their contentment, resources, and power, do not qualify as having achieved full well-being. That, certainly, would have been the Buddha's verdict. In his view, someone who lacks moral virtues such as compassion cannot be living as well as they might. Aristotle, working about one hundred years later and about three thousand miles to the west, would have agreed with the general point. By the lights of his ethics, only those who have developed moral virtues such as justice can achieve full well-being.

These are deep and difficult issues, of course; but I won't say more about them right now. I will leave that for later chapters. For it is high time that I explained how my argument will proceed.

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The book is structured as follows. In Part 1, I introduce the standard – 'means–end' – model of nature's value for us, according to which natural entities have instrumental or 'service' value for us on account of their causal powers, and argue that it is in certain respects deficient. In particular, I suggest, this model tends to come up short when it is applied to cases when nature contributes to our well-being by virtue of the religious, political, historical, personal, or mythic meanings it bears. To make sense of these sorts of cases, ones, that is, in which nature has *cultural* value, a new model of nature's value is needed, one that registers the fact that natural entities can have value for us, not just as causally efficacious means to certain ends, but as parts of certain meaningful wholes. I present such a model in Part 2. In Part 3, I consider that model's implications for debates about concepts of naturalness, the intrinsic value of natural entities, and environmental policy and practice. Along the way, I examine the following case studies:

(i) *Mayotte* (Chapter 1)
(ii) *Navajo relocation* (Chapter 3)
(iii) *Saami reindeer herding* (Chapter 3)
(iv) *The great forest sell-off* (Chapter 3)
(v) *The Mahabodhi tree* (Chapter 4)
(vi) *The Great Lisbon Earthquake* (Chapter 6)
(vii) *Cornflowers* (Chapter 6)
(viii) *Dark skies* (Chapter 6)
(ix) *Eating whales* (Chapter 6)
(x) *Dugong hunting* (Chapter 9)

(xi) *Jumbo Valley* (Chapter 10)

(xii) *Bauxite mining at Wane Kreek* (Chapter 10)

Here is a detailed chapter-by-chapter outline.

Part 1: Means and Ends

Chapter 1: Instrumentality and Causation

It is typically assumed that if some natural entity has value for us, then it must be of *instrumental* value to certain humans on account of its *causal* relations to them.

This *means-end model* provides a good account of many cases in which natural entities have value for humans. For instance, when a tree supplies Siobhan with shade from the fierce midday sun, then it is of instrumental value for her on account of its causal relations to her. More generally, when nature provides us with supporting, provisioning, or regulating ecosystem services, the means–end model gives a good account of the value the relevant service-providers have for us. The connections between the ecosystem services approach and nature conservation are explored in *Mayotte*, the first of the book's case studies.

Chapter 2: Cultural Ecosystem Services

The means–end model is often applied to cases in which nature has cultural value because of its political, religious, mythic, personal, or historical meanings. Those who presuppose this model typically use the concept of a *cultural ecosystem service* to try to make sense of such cases. They suppose that when natural entities have cultural value, they supply us with cultural ecosystem services.

Some object to this practice on the ground that 'ecosystems' is rarely an appropriate name for the provider of the relevant cultural service. Some object to attempts to price such services. Both those criticisms have some force, though neither provides a decisive reason to reject attempts to conceive of cultural value in terms of the provision of ecosystem services.

Chapter 3: Limitations of the Standard Model

The main problem with attempts to conceive of nature's cultural value in terms of service-provision is as follows. To think in terms of service-provision is to presuppose that when nature has cultural value, it serves as a causally-efficient means to certain ends.

Such suggestions fail to capture the intimacy of the relations between people and the natural entities they value. (As metaphysicians say, they imply, wrongly, that those relations must be external rather than internal.) Take the cultural value of reindeer for the Saami people of northern Europe. One of the reasons reindeer are of value for the Saami is because they are integral to that people's cultural identity. This is not to suggest that reindeer have a certain sort of instrumental value for the Saami, for that suggestion would imply, implausibly, that the reindeer could be replaced, without loss of value, by some alternative service provider. Nor is it to suggest that there are two distinct entities, the Saami on the one hand and the reindeer on the other, and a causal relation tying them together. On the contrary, one

cannot describe who the Saami as a people are without referring to the fact that they are *reindeer* herders. To comprehend the value reindeer have for the Saami, one cannot restrict oneself to thinking in terms of causality and instrumental value. One must move beyond the means–end model.

Part 2: Parts and Wholes

Chapter 4: The Meanings of Things

Nature is shot through with meaning. The sweeping dunes of a desert can symbolize God's ontological simplicity and lofty indifference.[7] Buddleia, the 'butterfly bush', can serve as a wonderfully non-indigenous emblem of wildness for post-Brexit Britain.[8] The bamboo's hollow core can allude to what Buddhists regard as the essenceless nature of all things.[9] In this sense of 'meaning', all manner of natural entities, from hedgerows to the changing of the seasons, can be said to have meaning.

Meaning typically depends on context. A word has whatever meaning it has in the context of the sentence in which it occurs; a musical phrase acquires its meaning from its place in a particular musical piece; a particular sacred grove owes its meaning to some wider constellation of religious beliefs and practices—and so forth. In short: when x has meaning, it typically has meaning in relation to some whole, y.

Chapter 5: Constitution

In many cases, value tracks meaning. In particular, when some natural entity has value for us on account of its meaning, and that meaning depends on some context, y, then the entity's value for us will typically depend on y. More precisely, the entity will be of *constitutive* value—of value, that is, because it is *part of*, rather than a *means to*, y.

This *part–whole model* of value sheds light on the three cases presented in Chapter 3 (namely, *Navajo relocation*, *Saami reindeer herding*, and the *Great Forest Sell-off*) as well as the fourth case, *The Mahabodhi tree*, which was presented in Chapter 4. In each of those four cases, some natural entity has value because it contributes (though not of course intentionally) to some meaningful whole which, in turn, qualifies as valuable by virtue of its links with human well-being. Take the example of the Saami's reindeer. The reindeer play an important role in the Saami's cultural identity. If, as seems likely, their having that identity contributes to their well-being, then, by the lights of the part–whole model, the reindeer have constitutive value for the Saami.

This conception of constitutive value is then compared with three other kinds of value—namely, (1) value for us, (2) value all things considered, and (3) aesthetic value.

Chapter 6: Value and Disvalue

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[7] See Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[8] See Mark Cocker, *A Tiger in the Sand: Selected Writings on Nature* (London: John Cape, 2006), pp. 113–14.

[9] See Miaohui, quoted in B. Grant (ed.), *Daughters of Emptiness: Poems of Chinese Buddhist Nuns* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), p. 122.

Many natural entities have cultural value, but some have cultural *disvalue*. An entity acquires this kind of disvalue when it undermines a meaningful and valuable whole, as when an earthquake destabilises one's religious faith. But entities can also acquire cultural disvalue by contributing to wholes that are meaningful but *dis*valuable, as when—for example—a particular flower is adopted as an emblem of an evil political cause. In cases of the latter sort, the whole will count as disvaluable, even though it is valued by devotees of the relevant cause. And those entities that contribute to that disvaluable whole will thereby acquire cultural disvalue. If, by contrast, a meaningful whole is not morally bad but merely based on false beliefs, it might nonetheless qualify as valuable and, accordingly, natural entities might acquire constitutive value because of the roles they play in it. The same may be said of traditions and other meaningful wholes that have recently been invented. They, too, might qualify as valuable, and natural entities might therefore have constitutive value because of the roles they play in them. These issues are explored by means of four further case studies: *The Great Lisbon Earthquake*, *Cornflowers*, *Dark skies*, and *Eating whales*.

Chapter 7: Deep Ecology, Essentialism, Narrative, and Relational Value

In some respects, the part-whole model resembles certain other accounts of environmental value. In particular, the claim that natural entities can have constitutive value as parts of certain meaningful and valuable wholes may call to mind the following claims and approaches: (a) the deep ecological proposal that natural entities have value as parts of what Arne Naess once called one's 'comprehensive Self';[10] (b) the 'essentialist' claim, defended by writers such as William J. Fitzpatrick, that nature can have constitutive value because certain kinds of engagement with it are essential components of human well-being;[11] (c) the narrative-based account set out in John O'Neill, Alan Holland, and Andrew Light's jointly-authored book *Environmental Values*; and (d) the view, chiefly associated with the work of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, that in many cases natural entities have, not just intrinsic and instrumental value, but also *relational value*. Comparing the part-whole model with these accounts not only situates it within the field of environmental philosophy as a whole; it also illuminates some of its key features.

Part 3: Wider Issues

Chapter 8: Why *Nature*?

The preceding arguments might be used to support the conclusion that not just some natural entities but also some *non*-natural ones have constitutive value for people on account of the meanings they bear. Notre-Dame Cathedral, for instance, seems to have constitutive value for many Parisians just as Uluru ('Ayer's Rock') has constitutive value for some indigenous Australians. What is more, even when a certain natural entity has constitutive value, it is a

[10] 'Ecosophy T: Deep Versus Shallow Ecology', in L. P. Pojman (ed.), *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application, 3rd ed.* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001), pp. 150–7, at p. 151.
[11] 'Valuing Nature Non-Instrumentally', *Journal of Value Inquiry* 38 (2004): 315–32.

further question whether it has such value precisely because it is (or is taken to be) natural. Reconsider the Saami's reindeer. Even if they qualify as being in some sense natural, it is a further question whether they are of value to the Saami *because* they are (or are taken to be) natural in that sense.

Do any entities have constitutive value precisely because they are (or are taken to be) natural? It depends what one means by 'natural'. In the present context, that word may be taken to mean something like *largely unshaped by human intentional actions*.

That concept of naturalness has not made sense to all people in all times. Be that as it may, the fact remains that many people in modern Western societies do distinguish between what is natural and what is human in this way. For some of them, moreover, natural entities are of constitutive value precisely because they seem to be natural. One such case is presented in Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*. If Harrison is correct, then wild nature has constitutive value for us precisely because it evokes a radically nonhuman—and, in this sense, natural—realm.

Chapter 9: Beyond Value for Us

Previous chapters will have focused on nature's value for us—that is, the value it has by virtue of the contributions it makes to human well-being. Readers towards the dark green pole of the environmental spectrum may dismiss this focus on human well-being as unacceptably anthropocentric. But to highlight nature's constitutive value for us is not to deny that it can have other kinds of value. And in fact there are reasons to think that some natural entities have constitutive value because of the meanings they have for certain nonhuman animals. Besides, whether or not meaning-apprehension is a distinctively human capacity, some such entities certainly can have instrumental value for animals, as berries have value for bears or aspen twigs value for beavers. In addition to this, there are reasons to think that some natural entities are valuable for their own sakes, and not simply for the sake of other things, such as those human or nonhuman beings to whose well-being they contribute. There are reasons, that is, to think that some natural entities have intrinsic value.

The relations between nature's intrinsic values and its constitutive values are explored by means of a tenth case study, *Dugong hunting*.

Chapter 10: Constitution and Rights

The fact that some natural entity, x, has constitutive value does not entail that x ought, all things considered, to be protected. Nonetheless, in some cases such entities ought to be protected for precisely this reason. The point may be made in terms of *rights*. More precisely, when x has high constitutive value for Person A, the normative reasons for action that derive from its having that value may be appropriately expressed in the language of rights. One can say that x should be protected out of respect for A's rights. In the book's eleventh case study, *Jumbo Valley*, the relevant right is a right to religious freedom. In its twelfth and final one, *Bauxite mining at Wane Kreek*, it is a certain kind of property right.