Empowering Youth through Environmental Storytelling

# Human–nature connection

What should the relationship between humans and nature be?

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News Decoder

TEHRA
The Environment and Human Rights Academy

Authors: Anka Stankovic (TEHRA), Andreea Pletea (TEHRA), and Amina McCauley (News Decoder),

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The Empowering Youth through Environmental Storytelling is a collaboration between The Environment and Human Rights Academy (TEHRA), News Decoder and the Young Educators European Association (YEEA).

The purpose of these educational materials is to help young people understand the climate crisis on a systems level through engaging with the topics and foster agency through the skills and techniques of journalism.

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For further information on the use of this resource, please email andreea.pletea@tehra.org or maria.krasinski@news-decoder.com.

We cannot be held liable for how these materials are used in practice.

These educational resources have been developed to the best of our knowledge, using reliable and widely-recognized sources. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy and clarity, we cannot guarantee that the materials are free from errors or omissions. Climate change is a field of knowledge that continues to evolve, and teachers and learners are encouraged to consult up-to-date scientific sources (e.g. IPCC, IPBES or national agencies) to complement and enrich these activities.

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# LEARNING OBJECTIVES

## Learning objectives

1. Analyse the relationship between humans and our environment, and how this relates to the climate crisis
2. Be present and observant in nature

✅ **GreenComp alignment:**

- Systems thinking
- Promoting nature
- Critical thinking

## Unit guide

We recommend that you begin your class with the Opening Activity, to get an understanding of how much your students have considered the topic. The video gives an engaging and visual overview of the lesson's concept.

The Learn text can be a short lecture or reading time, before going through the project, which includes a meditation activity and a descriptive writing task.

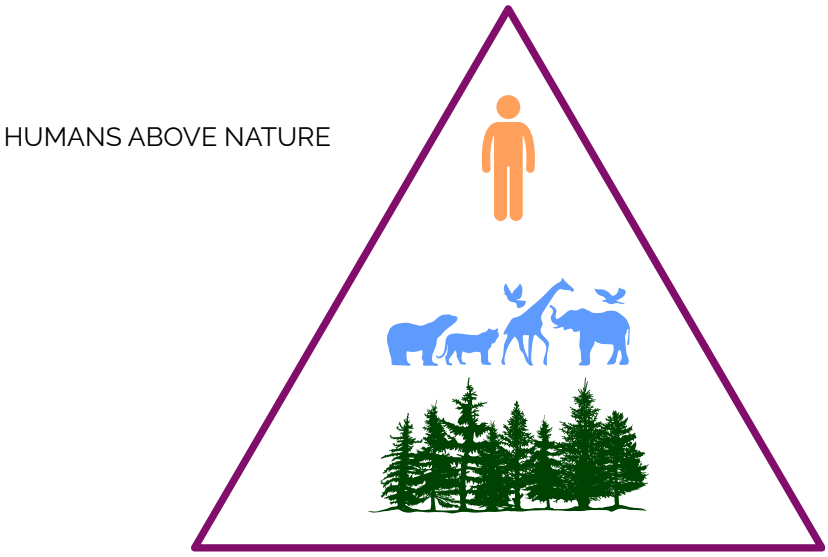
Optional Activities include further discussion on the human–nature relationship and how this relates to the climate crisis.

The link to the slides can be found here.

## Discuss and watch

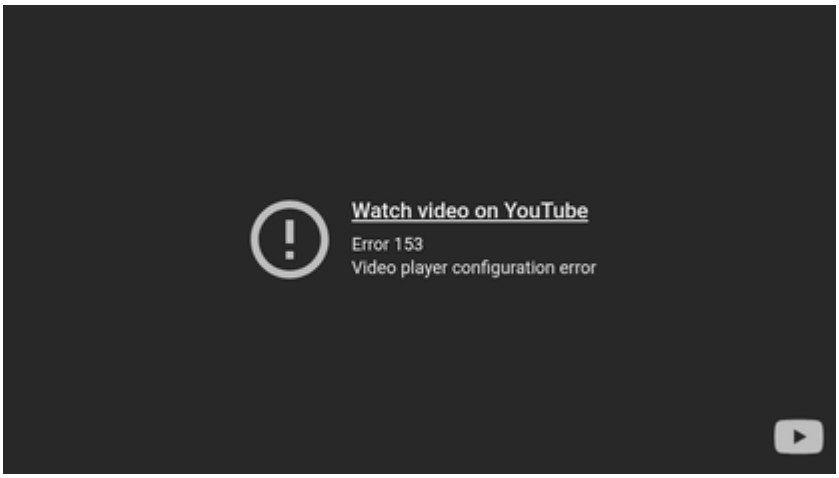
**What do you think about the below image?**
(5 minutes)

1. Do you agree with this depiction of humans being above nature? Why or why not?
2. What do you think can go wrong with this view?




**Watch the below video and discuss**
(10 minutes)

1. How do you feel after watching this video?
2. How different do you think we would behave if we respected nature?
3. Do you think Indigenous worldviews and ideas should play a bigger role in how we make decisions about the environment? Why or why not?



## 1. Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism, the belief that humans are separate from and above all other life forms, is actually a relatively recent perspective in human history.

Many Indigenous cultures have long embraced worldviews that emphasize interconnectedness, where humans are just one part of a vast, living network. In these philosophies, the boundaries between humans, animals, plants, and even fungi are fluid, fostering a deep respect for all forms of life.

Many believe we should learn from these Indigenous cultures, which have had balanced relationships with nature for millennia, on how to respond to the current climate and environmental crisis.

Modern science increasingly supports this interconnected view. Take mycorrhizal fungi, for example. These fungi form symbiotic relationships with plant roots, meaning both organisms benefit: the fungi receive sugars from the plants, and in return, they help plants absorb water and nutrients from the soil.

These fungi form underground networks, often called the "Wood Wide Web," and they connect trees, enabling them to share resources and even send warning signals to each other about environmental threats. So, technically, trees can also speak to each other. Initially, scientists believed this communication occurred solely through chemical signals.

However, recent research has revealed that these networks also transmit electrical signals, similar to those in animal nervous systems[1]. This discovery blurs the lines between plant and animal communication, highlighting the complex and dynamic relationships that sustain life on Earth.

Changing the way we relate to other living beings on this planet would be an example of a systemic solution, as it changes the mindsets of people, one of the key leverage points (you can learn more about this in our Unit on Systemic Change).

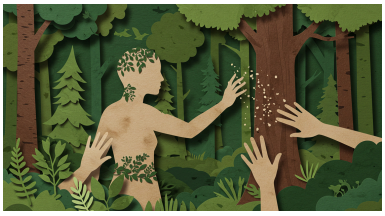
If we were to build back empathy towards other forms of life, we simply could not continue to have such an exploitative relationship with the environment.

## 2. Benefits of nature connection

Although anthropocentrism dominates much of modern thinking, particularly in the Global North, it is, in fact, a relatively recent worldview. For only a few thousand years have humans positioned themselves as separate from and superior to nature. In contrast, for most of human history, people had a deeply relational understanding of the world, with many cultures around the world still seeing humans as part of, rather than as separate from ecological systems.

In our current era marked by the biodiversity and climate crises, many believe that it is not only helpful, but necessary to turn to alternative worldviews,[2] [3]ones that help us see ourselves once again as participants in the web of life. This reorientation challenges dominant narratives of endless extraction and opens the door to more grounded and reciprocal approaches to decision-making.

Many Indigenous cosmologies have long understood animals, plants, and landscapes as kin or relatives, not resources. They often structure their governance systems around reciprocal obligations and collective wellbeing across species lines, with Indigenous people being at the forefront of biodiversity protection.[4]



This knowledge offers powerful insights into how we might live otherwise, especially in confronting the systemic causes of the ecological crises.[5] [6] At the heart of this way of thinking is human–nature connection.

It is also important to highlight that such relational worldviews existed in Europe too. For example, in Serbia, the main Christmas chant greets the oak tree as our old cousin, celebrating the joy it brings to the home. The Druids of Ancient Britain honoured the interconnectedness of all living things and recognised Nwyfre, an animating life force in nature. Their practices were often tied to seasonal cycles and forested landscapes.

Increasing human–nature connection and protecting human–nature bonds is essential to transforming our current trajectory and achieving sustainability and justice.[7] There is ample evidence that such connection also enhances human wellbeing and happiness,[8] something that many intuitively feel.

The following meditation activity doesn't have to be one-off - the more you practice meditation, the more effective it can be to connect to nature.

When we feel the awe, beauty and familiarity that nature can give, we will be able to better understand the environmental issues we are currently facing, and, more importantly, think of effective solutions.

# Descriptive writing

### Start with a meditation

Outdoor meditation promotes mindfulness, helping to foster a deeper sense of connection to nature.

This experience enables participants to connect physically and emotionally with the surrounding ecosystem, enhancing their sense of presence and fostering a heightened awareness of their place within the natural world.

This activity has the potential to help your students learn to:

- Observe nature using their senses (sight, sound, touch, smell)
- Develop calmness and awareness through guided mindfulness
- Appreciate the beauty and complexity of local ecosystems

For this activity, it is best to choose a nice outdoor area such as a school garden, park, tree-lined area, or even go for an outing to a nice green space. Take a notebook and pen.

Instructions for the meditation are on the following page.

### Write about your experience

After the meditation, start by writing down, with as much rich description as possible, your surroundings.

What smells, sights, and sounds are there? What does it feel like? Try to write so that anyone reading it would feel like they were sitting there with you.

A powerful storytelling tool is to bring your audience to where the story takes place. Are the colours sharp or soft? Is the movement of the trees like a gentle swaying dance between two people? Or are they as still and as strong as a wall?

After writing your description, journal about the meditation.

- How did the meditation make you feel, both physically and mentally?
- Did you notice any changes in your stress levels during or after the session?
- Can you describe any moments during the session when you felt particularly connected to the natural surroundings? What was that experience like for you?
- After this experience, do you feel more interested in learning about or participating in activities related to protecting the environment? Why or why not?

**Meditation instructions (for educator)**

Find a spot, preferably outside, where students can sit or lie down, each with a bit of space around them.

Ask them to close their eyes and sit silently for a minute or so first, to allow any giggling or outwardly energy to pass and calm.

You can guide them through a simple meditation using the notes below. Adjust for context and for preference.

A good way to bring them into the present is to ask them to open their eyes again and fix their eyes on a piece of nature that is in front of them. Ask them to acknowledge what they see in their peripheral vision, and to name 5 of those things in their head. Then ask them to close their eyes and silently name 5 things they can hear around them (bird song, leaves moving with the wind, etc.), and then to name 5 things they can feel on their physical body (wind, ground beneath them, tickling sensation, etc.).

Get students to focus on their breath, in and out slowly through their nose, counting the breath, becoming more and more relaxed in their bodies.

Ask them to notice their bodies touching the earth beneath them, and to consider all of the life beneath the earth they can't see. Notice the nature around them and the beauty of it just being as it is.

If appropriate, suggest that they extend gratitude or appreciation to the nature around them.

Ask them to notice if they feel any emotions arise, whether that's boredom, calmness, sadness, or anything else. Have them stay with, without judgement, any feelings that arise.

You can cycle through the above (from breath to emotions) as you wish. Finally, ask students to open their eyes and gently notice all the colours, movements, and sights of nature around them, before completing the meditation and asking them how they feel.

## Continue journalling or discussing

Below are more questions that you can have students answer either through discussion or journalling, to get them to engage deeper with the concept of human–nature connection and why it's important for addressing the current climate crisis.

- When do you feel most connected to nature? Why do you think that feeling matters?
- Can you think of a time when being in nature changed the way you felt or thought about something?
- Why do you think many societies have become disconnected from nature?
- How might this disconnection affect the way we respond to climate change?
- What happens when we see nature as something separate from us, rather than something we are part of?
- How might a stronger connection to nature change the way we design cities, food systems, or energy systems?
- Do you think reconnecting with nature could help people make more sustainable choices? Why?

## Endnotes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