

## Letter to the Editor

# Finding a Unified Understanding of Nature

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The International Union for the Conservation of Nature's World Parks Congress held in Australia last year was an impressive show. Running for an entire week, with sessions starting early for avid bird watchers and ending late for the serious policy makers. It attempted to deliver a comprehensive program addressing environmental issues facing our Planet. A once in ten-year event saw 6000 people from every corner of the globe attend and was promoted as a huge success. Yet for some it did not deliver a long-lasting vision for protecting our ecosystems.

Delegates presenting at various sessions failed to engage in the complex interaction of ecosystems, humans and non-human populations with discussions often applying upstream dialogue lacking local downstream narratives (this may not have been intentional, yet it was quite palpable). One such narrative was the application of the term 'nature' that was often applied too narrowly to offer clear actions. This is a difficult terrain to navigate as there is a need to have a descriptor that respectfully acknowledges the nuances of a relationship that has been forged over numerous millennia and is continuously evolving.

One narrative frequently discussed was the innate biophilic love of nature (Wilson 1984). The Biophilia Hypothesis has been contested vigorously because this 'love of nature' goes beyond innate explanation (Simaika and Samways 2010). We believe that this connection can be described as a nested diagram, an interplay of various dimensions that relate to an individual, a small group, a

population and all underpinned by a firm (yet gentle) hold on the ground upon which we walk. This involves the interplay of determinants demonstration that there is a multi-layered and holistic relationship with our environments.

Many may feel that 'nature' is adequate but some would argue it has become a meaningless term, inappropriately used to mean the separation of society and the non-human world. Strathern (1992, p. 197) acknowledges that nature is timeless and enduring with its ability to be reimagined because "we are still after Nature: still act with nature in mind" but the dimensions of it have become so trivial that it is now a mere artefact.

Aboriginal and non-Indigenous constructions of nature are different (Strang 2009). Nature often fails to integrate social and cultural issues causing Indigenous understandings of land to be viewed as the 'other'. Myers (1986) notes that Australian Aboriginal people have beliefs, histories, identities and practices ingrained in the environment. There are beliefs that Aboriginal peoples' land (known as Country) encapsulating all aspects of life both spiritually, as a 'social framework', 'economic template' and belief system. However, this knowledge must be considered with caution because Indigenous cultures are diverse rather than homogenous.

In keeping with the nested diagram, we have found an Aboriginal term, 'Ngurra', to be an excellent starting point for more inclusive discussions on 'nature'. Ngurra not only encompasses the relationship one has with immediate environment but also a small group, larger collective and

Country as the foundation (Karajarri Traditional Lands Association 2014). Myers (1986, p. 55) explains Ngurra's multiple meanings in the social setting as "a temporary camp" where people live as well as "country" or "named place". There are conceptual differences between Ngurra as Country or camp. Camps are physically malleable whereas Country is 'enduing'.

Ngurra-Kurlu has been explained as a template for understanding culture, a way of teaching, improving well-being and a catalogue to insure ecosystem health (Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu et al. 2008; Holmes and Jampijinpa 2013). This concept has been identified as critical in environmental management because it provides the framework for sustaining Country, cross-cultural learning/connection and fostering ecosystem stewardship.

Caring for the Country is deeper than pure management of a geographical location because it implies looking after one's home. In Western discourse, we need to reimagine ideas of environmental management to full incorporate such values. The re-imagining of Country is supported by Tacey (2000, p. 162) who calls for a "re-enchantment", where sacredness is "the key to environmental integrity". Evidence of this has been found in parts of Australia, and yet the approach to re-imagining, re-enchanting and re-stor(y)ing is still fragmented (Lawson et al. 2015).

Ngurra like any definitions can often be 'problematic' as they cross-cultural 'boundaries' causing unease. Explaining the difficulties associated with terminology, Orlove (2002) noted that it comes down to local people possibly having dissimilar systems of categorising words. So then how do we go forward in defining nature? EcoHealth researchers can play a role in promoting more productive discussion that cuts across cultures, ecosystems and knowledge systems. Recently, the Guardian published an article emphasising the importance of Indigenous terms as

a mechanism for healing (Tan 2015). When having such discussions the application of language like Ngurra ensures a starting point for exchange of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge.

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