

## INTERPRETING HUMAN'S PLACE IN NATURE

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### **Abstract**

*The main scope of this article is to discuss the human-nature relationship and the influence of outdoor learning on this relation. Nature is conceived in today's society as opposition of culture and as have shown researchers people don't see themselves as a part of the nature when they have to define nature. As a result of the propaganda of different green movements and the instructions from teachers and forest guards, youngsters consider the right behaviour in the forests as follows - no walking on the grass and off the official forest paths, no picking flowers etc. They consider environmental protection very important, but at the same time they are not sure what it is. There is a gap between knowledge and action.*

*The rules that forbid free exploring in the wilderness are reinforcing the alienation from nature. As a result of alienation children don't have a clue how and what the things that surround them are made of and where do they come from have shown several sociological studies made in Germany by natural sociologists. One interesting result of these studies is the fact that children who spend more time outside have similar idea of nature as have the others who have had less personal contact with nature. This shows that alienation from nature exist also on theoretical level as a product of nowadays society. The article argues that it is important to start considering man as a sign that is a part of larger web of signs - the semiobiosphere as believed Mikhail Bachtin and Charles Sanders Peirce.*

**Parole chiave:** *outdoor learning, nature, semiobiosphere.*

### **Man-nature and nature-culture relationship**

This article supports the ecologically and also semiotically holistic viewpoint which was characteristic to the works of Charles S. Peirce and Thomas A. Sebeok. The premise of this article is that everything in the biosphere is connected and a change in one thing has an effect also on the others.

The environmental movements that explain why it is important to protect and not harm nature are not preoccupied about the relationship between humans and nature, their scope is to save the nature from a man. This is not very effective solution to the environmental problems at least not from the human perspective.

For many environmental movements it is important that the nature remains untouched. Under these conditions it is difficult to have personal relationship with nature. Little knowledge about surrounding environment and not enough personal experience in nature just grows our alienation from nature.

As a result of a false ideology, it has become a common knowledge that humans and animals, nature and culture are perceived as binary oppositions in contemporary world. Thomas A. Sebeok wrote that “The study of the twin processes of communication and signification can be regarded as ultimately a branch of the life science, or as belonging in large part to nature, in some part to culture, which is, of course, also a part of nature”(Sebeok 1994: 114).

This opposition between nature and culture is something that has become with the time “natural”, something that doesn’t arise much criticism; altogether it is possible to summarize it as a false ideology. This opposition is strengthened by scientific discourses where is still possible to notice strong influence of the definition of human being as “*res cognitans*”, a definition where the “animality” of human being is cancelled. The Aristotelian definition of human being as “rational animal” wasn’t much better according to John Deely, who wrote in his book “Basics of Semiotics” that “The problem was that, in this definition, the term “animal” was somehow never quite taken seriously, and most of the discussion centered showing how “being rational” contrasted with “being animal” in such a way to render animality unimportant” (1990: 50).

Instead of this definition I would like to emphasize the significance of a new definition of human being as semiotic animal. Even though John Deely, who was one of the first semioticians with Augusto Ponzio and Susan Petrilli to use the term “semiotic animal”, considers it wrong to speak about semiotic animal “until it is realized that “the keystone of the life of the mind is the sign” (Maritain 1957: 3), and the consequence of this realisation begin to surge into consciousness... [a semiotic animal] is an animal that lives with the awareness of the action of signs as more fundamental to the constitution of human experience than are either objects or things” (J. Deely, S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio 2005: 213).

Just as important as restoring “animal” in the definition of human being, is the addition of “semiotic”. When we start to consider ourselves as “semiotic animals” then after some time it becomes a new ideology, a new common knowledge that human *Umwelt* or reality is based on signs, for this reason I consider it necessary to start to use the definition of “semiotic animal” from this moment on.

This new definition of *homo sapiens* as semiotic animal re-establishes the relationship between human being and its environment, restoring the place that

humans have always had among the other living organisms as has noted as early as 1926 Mihhail Bachtin in his article “Contemporary Vitalism” (published under the name of Kanaev) and later also J. Hoffmeyer, who emphasized the importance to resolve the dualism that governed modern science, where the world is divided into cultural and natural spheres, and to seek for a boundary to establish a link between the two alienated sides of human existence and by doing so give back humanity its place in nature (in “Signs of Meaning in the Universe” 1996). Hoffmeyer saw a possible solution in the discipline of biosemiotics and another possible solution was offered by Kalevi Kull in ecosemiotics. Kull writes in his article “Semiotic ecology: different natures in the semiosphere” that “ecological knowledge (as a natural scientific knowledge) is in principle not sufficient to solve many ecological problems, it is incapable of meeting the environmental issues of contemporary culture... without understanding the semiotic mechanisms which determine the place of nature in different cultures, one has little hope of solving many serious environmental problems, and of finding the stable place of culture in nature.” So he believes that “Ecosemiotics may become a large and important field of research with considerable practical applications. This is subjective human ecology (considering under 'subjective' here the meaning given by J. v. Uexküll), or in other words, it is human ecology as extended toward semiotics, human ecology from the semiotic point of view (Kull 1998: 344-371). According to K. Kull:

“Ecosemiotics can be defined as the semiotics of relationships between nature and culture. This includes research on the semiotic aspects of the place and role of nature for humans, i.e. what is and what has been the meaning of nature for us, humans, how and in what extent we communicate with nature. Ecosemiotics deals with the semiosis going on between a human and its ecosystem, or a human in ones ecosystem. In this, it can be related to ethnology and sociology of man-nature relationships, to environmental psychology and the anthropology of environment, which, although quite close to ecosemiotics, deal more with the comparative than the semiotic aspects of the problem.

Ecosemiotics is thus quite different from biosemiotics. Ecosemiotics can be considered as a part of the semiotics of culture, which investigates human relationships to nature which have a semiotic (sign-mediated) basis, whereas biosemiotics can be seen as different from the cultural semiotic field. Both, nevertheless, are researching nature from the semiotic point of view (1998: 351).

Besides biosemiotics and ecosemiotics there is also quite new semiotics discipline called “semioethics” which adds valuable tools to the analysis of nature and culture.

In semioethics the nature-culture, nature-men relationships are considered from the view point of “responsibility”, “being without alibis” in today’s world of global communication and communication-production. According to Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio the definition of semioethics is as follows:

“As a semiotic animal, the human being is capable of reflecting upon signs, human and nonhuman, upon all types of signs over the entire planet...therefore to suspend action, deliberate and make decisions, they are also in position to answer for themselves. The capacity for metasemiosis, or semiotics, implies the capacity to account for one’s choices and behaviour, therefore it implies the capacity for responsibility, which no doubt pertains exclusively to humankind...Insofar as human beings are capable of reflecting on signs, their own and of others, responsibility connected to this capacity implies the disposition to answer not only for one’s own signs but also for the signs of others. And in this present context, by ‘others’ is not only understood

the other human being, nor the other of one's own self, that is, the other *from* self or *of* self in the sphere of antroposemiosis, but also all other living beings on the planet, beyond the human... The capacity to 'answer for', to 'account for' is structural to human beings and implies the capacity for a responsible attitude towards life on earth in its globality. Therefore, the power of responsibility (whose importance to life must be underlined) presupposes man's semiotic or metasemiotic power: beyond the responsibility of power, the power of responsibility such considerations lead from the sphere of semiotics into what we propose to call the sphere of ethosemiotics or semioethics" (Deely, Petrilli, Ponzio 2005: 67-68).

Human beings are capable to understand and reflect upon the consequences of their actions and this ability puts them in a position of being without alibis in the world.

It is important to realize this responsibility towards life in semiobiosphere and more personal contact with the surrounding environment could perhaps make it harder to forget or ignore this responsibility. "We only know nature by its signs and how we experience and organize those signs will be controlled by the culture within which they are produced" (Staiano-Ross 2007: 16). From the moment we are born we are also immersed into the culture; the society has already provided us with the tools to interpret surrounding environment (both natural and social). "As we know, man finds himself immersed in sign systems from birth onwards, beginning with the non-verbal sign systems of the objects of common use produced by the culture to which he belongs, and with the verbal sign system *par excellence*, his mother tongue. Every *in-fans* is also *in-ficiens* who becomes a child and then develops into an adult because he learns to manipulate such systems at least in part – but it must be an initial and substantial part. They precede him in time, contain him in space, and impose precise behavioural programs upon him. Collaboration and reciprocal understanding are made possible by all this" (Rossi-Landi 1977: 59)

Nowadays cultural system has become global and therefore quite identical as this system supports indifferent differences. The differences that are not important and don't have any real difference between them and are actually more or less similar. Like the possibility that is offered by some producers of goods, who offer a client the possibility to choose some particulars of the product to make it more personal and characteristic to the buyer, but the truth is, that in the end this product is still very much the same as are all the other similar products. These indifferent differences are visible also in the cultural sphere as the different cultures are becoming more and more similar with the development of global communication-production system. These similarities have influence also on how the signs of nature are interpreted. As a result of the globalisation an attitude towards nature and the values connected with nature become similar all over the world and most characteristic to the nowadays approach to nature is alienation from it, as we live major part of our lives behind the glass and TV or computer monitors.

More personal relationship would leave the man without alibis and make him more responsible and aware of his actions. This could create responsible and acknowledged dialogue between humans and nature. As has told Thomas A. Sebeok "communication and life converge" and the end of communication would mean also the end of life.

It has not been only the definition of human being that has separated humans from nature, but also the way how the nature has been defined, analysed and perceived. Another important side of a scientific discourse of nature is that most of the researches (both on the scientific and cultural field) claim to be objective but it is not

possible to make an objective research on something (as nature) were the researcher himself is under the research (as a part of the nature) without influencing the research process. It should be obvious that all the researches on nature are influenced by human *Umwelt* and are made from anthropocentric point of view. The discourse used in researches on nature creates an illusion that humans are observing Gaia from the point of view that is outside Gaia, not on Gaia.

### **Defining nature**

There can not be any real division between nature and culture as culture is the result of human action and therefore is just as natural as action of any other animal. The devastating effect of grasshoppers that destroy the fields passing from one field to another is not considered unnatural, and the termites that destroy wood are still considered as a part of nature and just as well the result of their action. There is no reason for considering humans and result of human's doings as something that stands outside from the nature and in this sense humans and their action is not different from the one of the other animals and fits nicely in the borders of nature in general.

As wrote J. Hoffmeyer "...it is hard to see how ecology can be our guide and mentor in managing nature when it keeps splitting the world up into two distinct sectors, the natural and cultural – thereby upholding all of the emotional superstructure, all the illusions that alienate us from nature" (1996:143).

And Kalevi Kull wrote that "The notion of nature is itself the result of certain opposition, and there are many ways to build up further binary oppositions in human-nature relationships, used in different circumstances, which delimit or split nature in various ways" (1998: 346).

Further on Kull writes that "Making distinctions (polar oppositions) has a tendency to replace the importance of the whole by the importance of particular parts. A trivial example in our context would be the distinction between nature and culture, which leads us to think that the processes in culture and nature are separated, and that the processes of culture or respectively of nature are more important to consider than those of the whole" (1998: 354-355).

But dividing human *umwelt* into culture and nature is just as well as splitting up ourselves – because these oppositions, nature and culture, are just two sides of the same thing, the life itself as humans see it.

The alienation from nature has reached to the level that have made necessary scientific researches that are searching for evidences to prove that humans are part of the nature and that what happens in nature has influence on humans. For example Rachel Kaplan's research on how the view from home window has influence on well-being. After making a survey at six apartment communities using both verbal and visual material, her research team arrived to a conclusion that the view from the window contributes substantially to residents' satisfaction with their neighborhood and with diverse aspects of their well-being (Kaplan 2001).

Every year several researches are made that confirm connection between humans and nature – it seems strange that there is a need for this kind of researches because this connection should be taken as something obvious and not as a new and amazing discovery after the conclusion of another similar research. But the need for these researches shows explicitly that the term "nature" itself has two faces. We can say that there is a nature that is understood as a process, as vulnerable, sensitive and complex system which is connected to the human body – nature that we learn to know from our own experience; and then there is another kind of nature – nature as a

product of nowadays production-communication system, a quite empty term that is easily manipulated and filled with different kinds of meanings.

Ferruccio Rossi-Landi writes that “Man and nature are measurelessly polysemous terms which pass from one to the other the difficulties of their own relations. The artefact is part of this relation as a product of work: so much so we can say that nature is everything that is *not* artefact; and that man as well, insofar as he is not artefact, is nature (*remains* such), while insofar as he is the product of his own work, he is no longer nature, and is, indeed, himself the most important artefact” (Rossi-Landi 1977: 31).

The level of alienation from nature or the illusion of being something extra natural has become more believable than the holistic worldview that connects nature and culture or nature and human being. As a result of this alienation the balance between body and mind, human being as a part of the nature and culture at the same time, has been ruined. It seems like we consider ourselves only as a part of culture that stand separately from the nature or from semiobiosphere.

Even though during the last 40 years there has been a shift in the term of “wilderness” or “not human faced” nature and something that was understood as opposition to civilization is not seen as a default anymore. In this shift we can notice the desire to re-establish balanced relationship between nature and culture.

Christina Ljungberg wrote in her article “Wilderness from ecosemiotic perspective” that “The scale of the global destruction of the natural environment and its various ecosystems has transformed the idea of wilderness from a negative concept to a matter of public concern, since its survival is intricately linked with the survival of our own habitat. A growing awareness of the irreversible implications of the destruction of natural spaces by unprecedented forms of human interference with nature has helped shape a new sensibility for our dependency on nature; it has also replaced the understanding of “wilderness” not only as a place, but as category with which humans are closely linked, and whose ecological sign processes need to be carefully interpreted” (2000:169-170).

For the last thirty or even more years the idea that it is important to protect nature has become widely known and the idea of nature has become positive, nature is understood as something pure and powerful and at the same time delicate and vulnerable, but the change in reputation as a result of the green way of thinking needs to be reviewed also from critical perspective.

Liisa Suomela, Senior Lecturer in Environmental Subjects from University of Helsinki made a research among her students about their views on nature. To the questions which definition of nature seems to them most appropriate 69% considered as the best definition “Nature is untouchable” and 58% thought that the second best definition was “With the word “nature” we mean wild animals and plants”. When the students were asked to define nature by themselves then 70 % of them wrote that “Nature is untouchable, a peaceful place” (Suomela 2007). But where is the place for humans in this untouchable nature?

### **Nature obscure**

In Germany, in University of Marburg, there have been made several sociological surveys about the youth relationship to the nature by natural sociologist Dr Rainer Brämer<sup>1</sup>. The results are interesting especially when considered from the

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Brämer published a book called “2006. Natur obskur: Wie Jugendliche heute Natur erfahren” and the

aspect of nature-man relationship.

Dr Brämer made three surveys, the first one in 1997 with 2500 schoolchildren from 10-17 years old, second one in 2003 with 1400 children between ages 11-14 and the third one in 2006 with 2200 pupils between ages 11-14. He summarized the result of the survey of 1997 as “The bamby-syndrome”. The meaning of “bamby-syndrome” is that the children don’t understand where and how the food gets on the table, they believe that every animal has a soul and killing animals is a murder and felling trees is bad, even though they don’t find nothing wrong with eating meat and living in wooden houses. Also they understood protecting nature as “you have to keep nature clean and must not disturb it, prohibitions signs are good, and walking across the forest is bad”.

To the “bambi-syndrom” was added in 2003 “Sustainable alienation from nature” – as the children did not understand what sustainability was and ignored the context between resources and products („slaughter-house-paradox“).

The fact that the teenagers forgot about the necessity of utilization of nature by human beings and were not interested in farm animals or plants was named “the taboo of economics” by Brämer. He concluded from his surveys that Bamby-syndrome blocks comprehension for sustainability.

The survey also investigated youth understanding of moral rules in the forest and it seemed like the most important moral rule was “don’t litter”.

The summary of the survey of 2006 was “nature obscure” – it was obvious that the education about sustainability has been without any effect. To the question “what is sustainability?” Brämer got the following answers: „Use less wooden things, more plastic” and “Don’t fell more trees than there are”. He also concluded from the research that the image of nature has been modified by media as 70 per cent of 7 year old children who participated in the survey thought that the ducks are yellow.

It is important to make children understand that using nature is not contrary to protecting it. And keeping away from nature does not help to improve the relationship between humans and nature. Conservation does not help to protect nature in the large picture. Having no personal relationship with nature makes us irresponsible and careless towards nature. It is easier to protect what you understand and care for, and therefore it is important to reestablish emotional connection between nature and humans.

### **Learning outdoors – what does it change?**

There are quite many definitions of outdoor learning which emphasise different aspects of it. Mark Lund defines outdoor learning as “...an experiential method of learning with the use of all senses. It takes place primarily, but not exclusively, through exposure to the natural environment. In outdoor education, the emphasis for the subject of learning is placed on relationships concerning people and natural resources” (2002:1). Outdoor learning seems at a first glance as a long searched answer to the problematic relationship between humans and their environment; a solution that may help us to overcome the fear of wilderness.

Outdoor learning has been practiced from 1970-s, but in some countries like Estonia it has been recently discovered and is considered as a new approach in education.

Hoffmeyer and Emmeche wrote in their article “Code-Duality and the Semiotics of Nature” that “...in older times information did not in general refer to the kind of detached fragments of knowledge called information today. Rather a person might receive information in the way of being educated. And not only was information seen as a more board concept, but also something as connected to the *process* of being informed. Information and person emerged into each other” (1991: 118).

This process of being informed seems to have lost its importance in contemporary education, as emphasize is mostly on the results and not so much on the process. It seems like there is a need for a change that considers other values than just good fact memory. And this possibility to emerge into the information seems to be offered by outdoor learning, where is possible to interact with surrounding environment.

In Idaho State University, were the first outdoor learning program started in 1970, the following benefits of outdoor learning were pointed out in 1973 by Harrison H. Hilbert, outdoor Program Coordinator of the Idaho State University:

“Through the outdoor program, students may gain a realization of their relationship to the natural environment which cannot be learned through abstract sources. This is not to say that the program finds no value in symposiums or formal classes concerning the increasing problems of man's alienation from his natural environment. Symposiums, seminars, slide shows, and talks by noted wilderness users can motivate a student to understand wilderness and their place within it. However, the actual wilderness experience is the concrete learning mechanism. The particular understanding which the student seeks must be experientially based. Such an understanding will have a profound influence upon the way he views the use of the remaining natural areas. Thus, experiences in the outdoor program may have a sociological, psychological and even political effect. A student who comes to know the wilderness on a first hand basis is far less likely to dissipate its resources than one who regards the wilderness as only an intangible, abstract realm with which he or she has no valuable interaction” (1973).

Outdoor learning seems like a perfect solution to change the moral values of students. Spending time outdoors definitely contributes to the well-being of students, but does it actually changes their worldview? Dr Brämers surveys on the subjective relationship of human beings to natural environment show that youngsters who have more direct connection with wilderness are emotionally more connected to nature and have higher engagement for protection of it but still have the same impression of nature, same moral horizon (considering as most harmful to the forest litter, the “rubbish-phobia” as Brämer calls it) as the youngsters, who have little experience in nature.

Pete Allison argues that “The teacher is no better placed to "fill students with knowledge" than students are themselves. This means that the individual's experience and interpretation is central. Individuals, or learners, come to educational experiences with their own narratives (life stories) and perceptions, and interpret these experiences based on those narratives. It follows that an educator's role becomes that of facilitating access to learning environments and supporting the learner in exploration, problem solving, growth, and development” (2000:1).

School forests may change the way how students experience the world but it is not going to happen by itself. Besides the personal experience in the wilderness our understanding of the environment is modified by many other factor that seem to have even stronger influence to the way how we understand the signs of nature than the

direct experience. It is possible to call these other factors social programming as does Feruccio Rossi-Landi. He writes that "...the execution of behavioural units, or non-verbal sentences, is what is meant by "meaningful behaviour"; and the execution itself must come about *according to program*. The executor follows instructions which are implicit in what he is executing for the very good reason that they have been *codified in it*. Which means that the sign systems to which the meaningful behaviour belongs has been previously produced: it is a result of past human work. When he realizes a program by behaving in a certain way, the executor *transmits messages* interpretable in terms of a *code common* to all members of the community. The previous human work which put the code in operation was, therefore, a social, communitary work: one *becomes* a member of a community insofar as, even without knowing it, one accepts its products and learns to use them" (Rossi-Landi 1977: 26-27).

The green movements are a new way of social programming and now it is possible to notice the influence of their messages.

### Conclusion

There is a need for a critical analysis of the messages of different green movements. It seems like the interpretation of these messages has taken a wrong turn at some point and that more important part of the message has been lost. People have taken over the empty formulas of moral values without making an effort to understand why these new values were introduced in the first place. Environmentalism has become a social program that influences our understanding of humans place in the nature; it has also become conventional, automatic and superficial.

It is necessary to understand how the nature-humans relationship is seen after thirty years of environmental protection lobby. How is understood the humans place on the planet? What kinds of values are connected to environment and wilderness?

It is also important to evaluate the influence of outdoor learning on the relationship between nature and the students who have participated in outdoor learning programs – does outdoor learning help to get over from the fear of wilderness? The fact is that youngsters are more interested in playing computer games than climbing a tree. How is it possible to make children to become interested in nature and in spending time outside the walls again? What kind of influence are globalization and technical development having on our relationship with nature and on our relationship with other species?

To analyze this situation is important to start viewing in critical way the hidden ideologies and social programming of contemporary world. It is also important to consider how the relationship between humans and nature is seen from the perspective of different cultures and to evaluate the monolithic influence of global communication.

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