



Nature

Spirituality in Nature

Issues for Discourse with Youth

Bahá'í Discourse - Nature

What is our relationship with nature?

In materialistic societies, natural resources are there to be exploited for profit.

But is nature also beneficial to our personality, health and spirituality?

What is that relationship across cultures and religions?

Can we return to the importance of nature for our material and spiritual well-being?

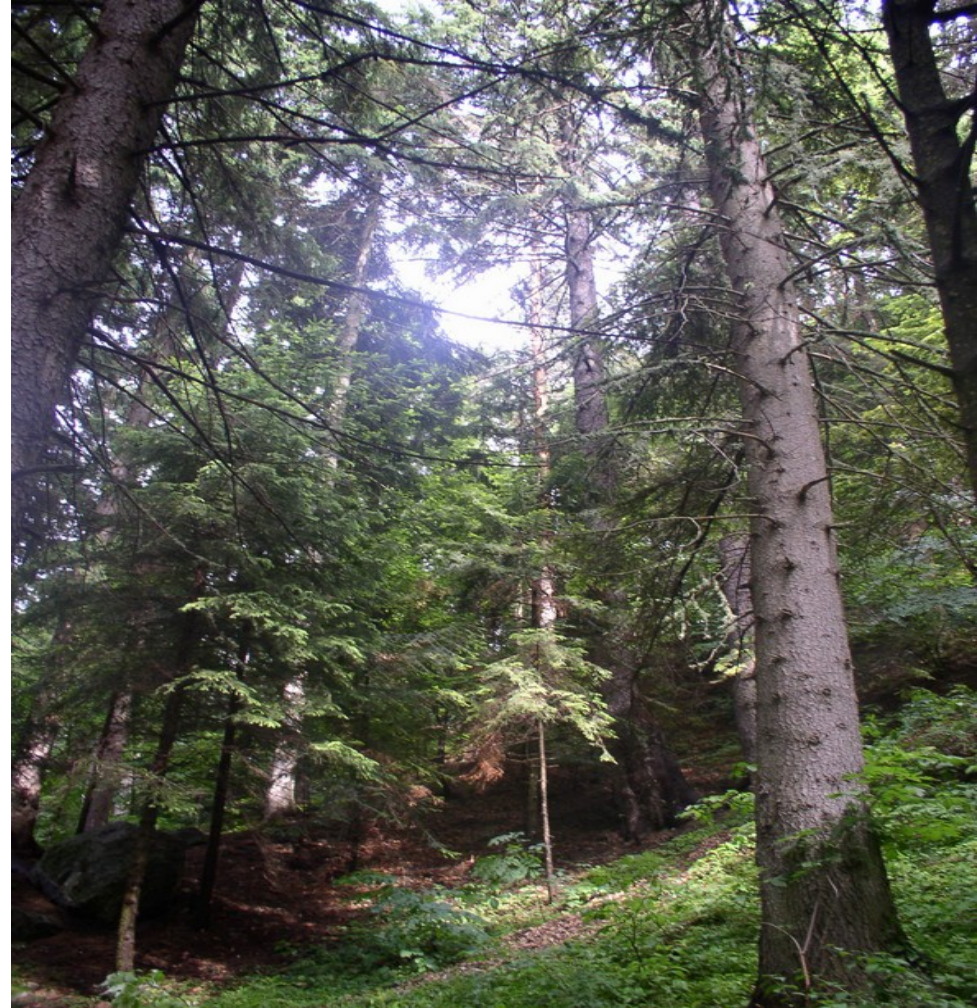
Our evolving relationship with nature

1. Nature is dominant, omnipresent and man is subject to the forces of nature, which are not understood, are feared, are given mystical/divine explanations. There is no separation between man and nature.
2. Nature is natural resources to be exploited. Human impacts seem tiny relative to the size of the Earth. Changes are slow and hardly noticed.
3. Nature conservation becomes urgent. Nature is fragmented and diminishing. We preserve examples in reserves. We no longer live in nature but in the human environment, which human activity has modified, with nature outside of us.
4. Loss of nature is imminent. Beginning of the Anthropocene, human impacts dominate natural transformations on a geological time scale. Humans cause the sixth great mass extinction.

Nature

Bahá'u'lláh loved the beauty and verdure of the country. One day He passed the remark: *'I have not gazed on verdure for nine years. The country is the world of the soul, the city is the world of bodies.'*

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*. Chpt. 3, p. 35)



Inner life and environment

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.

(Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 17 February 1933)

Indigenous Peoples

Man and nature are one



Indigenous Knowledge

- Deep spirituality linked to nature
- See themselves as part of nature, often tracing their ancestry back to some totem or part of nature
- Nature sends them signs to guide them
- May perform sacrifices or rites to please or appease nature
- Knowledge contains much that is scientifically valid, based on generations of observations and confirmations
- Includes both a detailed understanding of natural systems and processes, and practices that ensure the sustainability of natural resources

Kanaks of New Caledonia



Melanesia

Continental
island with
flora of 70%
endemic
species

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traditional
house

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Kanak knowledge of nature

- Names for and a classification of every significant species of plant and animal
- Periodic events like the movements of celestial bodies, the flowering and fruiting of trees, and the migrations of birds and fish were observed and incorporated into their system of knowledge and sense of time
- Master of the land distributed the land and maintained the cadastral system
- Master of yams or dry crops, and a master of wet or female crops (taro, bananas, sugar cane) were agricultural technicians who decided the timing of gardening operations, often with small sacred garden
- Master fisherman: when and where to catch or protect fish

New Caledonia



Kanak spirituality

- The Kanak did not identify himself as separate from the world around him
- He was part of the world and perceived himself by analogy with objects in nature such as the yam, whose cycle symbolized the cycle of life
- The ancestors were born from trees, and the body was identified with the vegetable kingdom
- The different plants had symbolic meanings that were used as a kind of language
- The land was the spiritual as well as material source of life
- The habitat was worshipped, and there was no distinction between magic or myth and the natural world

Solomon Islands, Melanesia

Ecology
Economy
and
Traditional
Religion



Managing a Traditional Shell Fishery

In the Indigenous culture, traditional shell money was used for important transactions like purchasing a pig or approving a wedding. This consisted of long strings of disks cut from shells, mostly white, with some black and a few orange, the rarest.

With development, there was more demand for shell money (inflation), and overfishing of the rare shells with an orange band from which disks could be cut.



Shells for making traditional shell money

Managing a Traditional Shell Fishery

The shell money was made in villages on the Lau Lagoon, where fishermen would dive looking for shells. The shells with orange had almost disappeared from overfishing.



Village of Ridvan, Maleita, Solomon Islands

Managing a Traditional Shell Fishery

As people in the villages became Christian or Bahá'í, the fishermen stopped respecting the pagan priest and ignored his tabu closing the lagoon to shell fishing. That is why the shells had disappeared.



Fisherman looking for shells

Managing a Traditional Shell Fishery

Traditionally, pagan priests managed the shell fishery, collecting pigs to sacrifice before lifting the tabu and opening an area to shell collecting for a limited time, allowing the shells to grow to maturity over 5 years, and maintaining the value of shell money in pigs sacrificed.

Solomon Islands



Sacred
Tabu
House
of the
Pagan
religion



Managing a Traditional Shell Fishery

By learning the wisdom of the traditional management practice in the Indigenous religion, and understanding that it was a scientifically valid way to manage the shell fishery, the fishermen could restore this wise fisheries management and preserve the value of their shell money.

A black and white photograph of a winter landscape. The foreground is a snow-covered slope. In the middle ground, there are numerous trees with snow-laden branches, some of which are in the foreground, framing the view. The background shows a valley with more trees and a distant horizon under a pale sky. The text "Spiritual Reality" is overlaid in the center in a white, sans-serif font.

Spiritual Reality

Spiritual

- Our spiritual purpose: to acquire virtues and attributes: love, compassion, forgiveness, trustworthiness, justice, humility, etc.
- Learning in contact with animals and nature
- Qualities of God reflected in nature, inspire awe
- Religions teach respect for nature, moderation, prohibit waste
- Humility looking at nature, drawing us out of ourselves
- The country is the world of the soul

Nature diverse yet connected

By nature is meant those inherent properties and necessary relations derived from the realities of things. And these realities of things, though in the utmost diversity, are yet intimately connected one with the other.

(‘Abdu’l-Baha)



Spiritual

- Great religious teachers retreated into wilderness to prepare their mission
- Indigenous spirituality, part of nature, ancestors were nature
- Mystical experiences in nature, deep resonance, finding self through being in nature
- Knowledge of nature from spiritual sources is an important complement to scientific sources of knowledge

A scenic view of a river flowing through a lush, green forest. The river is surrounded by large, moss-covered rocks and dense foliage. In the background, a wooden bridge with a metal railing spans across the river, with a person walking on it. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

**Nature and
our health and
well-being**

Health and well-being

- Health and healing are improved in contact with nature
- Urban people next to parks are healthier than those some distance away
- Hospital patients with a view of a tree through the window healed faster than those with other kinds of views, or even those with a video representation of the same tree
- Most adults active in environmentalism had experiences in nature as children

Our Relationship with Nature



A more sustainable lifestyle

...be content with little, and be freed from all inordinate desire.

Take from this world only to the measure of your needs, and forego that which exceedeth them.

(Bahá'u'lláh)

Emotional relationship with nature



Nature and humility

Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men. There can be no doubt that whoever is cognizant of this truth, is cleansed and sanctified from all pride, arrogance, and vainglory.

(Bahá'u'lláh)

A wide-angle photograph of a cemetery. A gravel path leads from the bottom left towards a building in the distance. The landscape is filled with various trees, including a large, dark, leafy tree on the left and several smaller trees on the right. In the foreground, there are several large, light-colored stone monuments. The sky is bright blue with scattered white clouds. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and serene.

Nature and Spirituality

Nature and Spirituality

- Spiritual reality is marginalized in secular societies
- Actively denied in some atheist circles
- The vast majority of humanity takes it as given that humankind has a spiritual nature and purpose
- Best expression of the ethical and moral principles associated with our relationship to nature
- Spiritual knowledge complements scientific knowledge





**All religions
teach about
nature**



Religious scriptures and texts

- Exhortations about respect for nature, moderation in its use, and a prohibition on waste
- Nature has a spiritual significance, with the qualities of God (or absolute perfection) being reflected in nature
- Contemplating nature is a path to spiritual understanding
- The wisdom in the revealed religions about nature is reinforced for believers by the power of Divine authority
- Christianity has the least reference to nature, relying more on Old Testament sources
- The Baha'i Faith has the most detailed references

Hinduism

All actions take place in time by the interweaving of the forces of Nature; but the man lost in selfish delusion thinks that he himself is the actor.

But the man who knows the relation between the forces of Nature and actions, sees how some forces of Nature work on other forces of Nature, and becomes not their slave.

Those who are under the delusion of the forces of Nature bind themselves to the work of these forces. Let not the wise man who sees the All disturb the unwise who sees not the All.

Judaism

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being. (Job 12:7-10)

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left. The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. The mirth of the timbrels is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased... (Isaiah 24:5-8)

Buddhism

This is what should be done by those who are skilled in goodness, and who know the path of peace... in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease. Whatever living beings there may be, whether they are weak or strong, omitting none, the great or the mighty, medium, short or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near and far away, those born to-be-born-- May all beings be at ease!...

Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upward to the skies, and downward to the depths, outward and unbounded. (from Metta Sutta, "Loving-kindness")

Christianity

He went up on the mountain by himself to pray. (Matthew 14:23)

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12-13)

...for "the earth and its fullness are the Lord's." (1 Corinthians 11:26)

The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for the dead to be judged, and to recompense your servants, the prophets, and the holy ones and those who fear your name, the small and the great alike, and to destroy those who destroy the earth. (Rev 11:18)

Islam

It is He who produceth gardens, with trellises and without, and dates, and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and pomegranates, similar (in kind) and different (in variety): eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. But waste not by excess: for God loveth not the wasters. (6:141 Al-An'am - Cattle)

And the earth We have spread out (like a carpet); set thereon mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance. (15:19 Al-Hijr - The Rocky Tract)

Islam

There is the type of man whose speech about this world's life may dazzle thee, and he calls God to witness about what is in his heart; yet is he the most contentious of enemies. When he turns his back, his aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and cattle but God loveth not mischief. When it is said to him, "fear God," he is led by arrogance to (more) crime. Enough for him is Hell; – an evil bed indeed (to lie on)! And there is the type of man who gives his life to earn the pleasure of God; and God is full of kindness to (His) devotees.

Bahá'í Faith

Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world. (Bahá'u'lláh)



Nature and Spirituality

...whatever I behold I readily discover that it maketh Thee known unto me, and it remindeth me of Thy signs, and of Thy tokens, and of Thy testimonies. By Thy glory! Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness; and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine omnipotence.

...I can hear from the whisper of the winds the sound of Thy glorification and praise, and can recognize in the murmur of the waters the voice that proclaimeth Thy virtues and Thine attributes, and can apprehend from the rustling of the leaves the mysteries that have been irrevocably ordained by Thee in Thy realm. (Bahá'u'lláh)

Spiritual Reality



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Nature and Spirituality

When... thou dost contemplate the innermost essence of all things, and the individuality of each, thou wilt behold the signs of thy Lord's mercy in every created thing, and see the spreading rays of His Names and Attributes throughout all the realm of being.... Then wilt thou observe that the universe is a scroll that discloseth His hidden secrets, which are preserved in the well-guarded Tablet. And not an atom of all the atoms in existence, not a creature from amongst the creatures but speaketh His praise and telleth of His attributes and names, revealeth the glory of His might and guideth to His oneness and His mercy.... ('Abdu'l-Baha)

Nature and Spirituality

And whensoever thou dost gaze upon creation all entire, and dost observe the very atoms thereof, thou wilt note that the rays of the Sun of Truth are shed upon all things and shining within them, and telling of that Day-Star's splendours, Its mysteries, and the spreading of Its lights. Look thou upon the trees, upon the blossoms and fruits, even upon the stones. Here too wilt thou behold the Sun's rays shed upon them, clearly visible within them, and manifested by them.

(‘Abdu’l-Baha)

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Spiritual Reality

(Linnaeus' garden)

Spiritual dimensions in our reaction to nature

- The greatness, grandeur, beauty, power, and wonders of nature can invoke in us a sense of humility.
- For those who are open to it, nature can produce a deep resonance with our spirit or soul.
- The great spiritual teachers (Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Bahá'u'lláh) retreated into the wilderness to prepare for their mission.
- People in search, and in many traditional cultures, seek mystical experiences in nature, or find their deeper self or direction in life through being in nature, sometimes as part of coming of age rites on reaching maturity.

The way ahead

- We need to reverse the steps in our evolving role in nature, completing the circle to bring wholeness to our approach
- Today's materialists still see their priority as making money by exploiting nature, or what might crudely be called rape and profit
- Others have become respecters of nature, acknowledging the importance of natural resources and our dependence on them, and admiring the beauties and wonders of nature, but they still have an environmental perspective with nature as something outside of themselves

The way ahead

Only if we combine a scientific understanding of the complex systems of which we are a part, with an awareness of the significance of our relationship to nature as something integral to our being and essential to our spiritual development, will we finally overcome the damaging misunderstanding of our separation from nature and accept our wholeness which can also become holiness

Humanity and Nature

