

Social issues in integrating nature-friendly-living

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Nature-friendly-living in society carries a sense of individual behavioural responsibility to the environment. However, to the uninformed individuals living in communities that lack a close relationship to nature, trying to integrate such a way of living with nature can endue an overwhelming sense of obligation. Through the use of social networking, the spread of joyful living as harmony with nature can create tacit goals of harmony within relationships between individuals and between individuals and their environment. Social networks are powerful entities that reduce an individual's perceived sense of obligation and responsibility. They take on a momentum of their own, creating a purpose for individuals to achieve a common goal. By focussing on the experience of well-being and achieving happiness through social relationships, better understanding of the environment is nurtured. Subsumed within this is the harmony within an individual's happiness, creating a snowball effect that continuously feeds the surrounding social network.

Keywords: harmony; nature-friendly-living; experience; remembering; noble nature, happiness; social network

Nature-friendly-living involves a harmony with nature that can be contextualized and perceived with two understandings. First, is a cultural understanding based on geography, history, education and social relations. This cultural understanding of harmony with nature is shaped by ways of experiencing well-being and remembering happiness. Second, is an understanding based on a philosophical framework where harmony is centred on ecological balance. Both *cultural* and *philosophical* understandings are interactive and can lead to a better relationship and interaction with the surrounding environment. However, both concepts can lead to better interaction with nature only if they focus on social relationships as an

integral part of the living environment. Since humans are a social species, social relationships account for a large part of our natural world.

Harmony and Happiness

There is no path to harmony with nature, Harmony with nature is the path.
(Council for Eco-Philosophy)

Harmony with nature conveys a sense of accord, peace, contentment, satisfaction, or happiness where everything fits together in a non-linear system. Seen from a philosophical and ecological view, the human species is an integral part and should be a part of that system. Edward Wilson coined the term *biophilia* to describe humans place in nature (1984). Biophilia is a powerful emotional affiliation that humans have for all living organisms. It is an innate urge or connection that binds us inextricably to all forms of life. (Wilson, 1984, Kellert & Wilson, 1993). Within a biophilia framework, it can be postulated that harmony with nature is also synonymous with happiness, a harmonious self, as a stable functioning being in the ecological balance of body/mind/environment. By stating that *harmony with nature is the path*, harmony becomes the road to self-actualization and happiness. The way or path, then, is essentially a quest for nature as happiness.

Before deepening the discussion on harmony and happiness as the true nature and innate tendency of human beings, there is another side to harmony. Harmony is the role played by humans as part of the living environment. It is defined by the assumption and acknowledgement of responsibility as an active and essential member of the entity of the whole ecology of the earth. Guiney and Oberhauser (2009) described this synergy well in their study of conservation volunteers' connection to nature. Their work showcased the self-reinforcing cycle stemming from a motivation for conservancy, to action as volunteers, and then to the outcomes of satisfaction through relaxation, stress reduction and exercise. These outcomes reinforced the motivation to continue volunteering. Kasser (2009) presented a

needs-based theory to explain the compatibility between personal well-being and ecological sustainability. This theoretical framework presents a compelling argument for a symbiosis between living sustainably and the satisfaction of peoples' needs for safety/security, competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Kasser, 2009).

Neither the combination of human and nature, nor the separation of human and nature creates harmony. Commonly misguided views of nature stemming from a romanticized image of the world discredits harmony. The human being must assume, understand and create its role as a consumer and transformer of energy from one realm of existence to another, within the limits of present knowledge, while striving to find new knowledge of a sustainable ecological niche for our species. One cannot simply find a harmonious relationship with nature, it needs to be learned, nourished, cared for and shared (Guiney and Oberhauser, 2009; Kasser, 2009). This stewardship perspective highlights basic nature relationships. These relationships include the self (mind, body, social and environmental perspectives), the family, the society and the *other*, defined as the context or everything except humans. A person cannot know happiness, until it is shared.

Happiness and Well-being

Happiness is a an elusive word and contested concept. Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2003) link happiness to subjective well-being through peoples' emotional and cognitive evaluation of their lives. Others hold different perspectives. As Daniel Kahneman (2010) argues, it is difficult to define the term in our complex societies. He presents happiness as a cognitive trap that confuses the term through the process of *experiencing self* and *remembering self*. Both are commonly summed up into one perception of happiness. Kahneman suggests this creates confusion that can affect the well-being of the individual because "it's between being happy in your life and being happy about your life or happy with your life" (Kahneman, 2010). Deiner et al. described this dialectic phenomena as an

evaluation “at the moment and for longer periods such as for the past year” (2003, p. 404), however they suggest that the concept of subjective well-being brings clarity rather than confusion to the concept of happiness.

Jill Bolte Taylor (2009) argues that well-being and happiness are two different concepts with different effects and consequences on the person. Bolte Taylor explains the difference from a brain scientist’s perspective. The right-brain hemisphere functions in the present, hence our experiencing self that perceives energy flows and direct stimulus. While on the other hand, the left-brain hemisphere is concerned with functioning and linking the past with the future by remembering and creating memories for decision-making. In short, the right-brain is concerned with well-being in the moment and the left-brain is interpreting passed memories in terms of emotions (happiness) to generate memories for future decision-making. Although, both hemispheres work in synchrony, the left side is predominant, and Bolte Taylor reasons that people in society need to develop more right sided hemisphere functions in order to live harmoniously. In other words, it is important to live in the moment; to be consciously present and aware of the here and now.

Harmony and Social Networks

Relationships to nature are both experienced and remembered as part of the complete *self*. Although self is a solitary unit, the experience of self and the way we remember a particular experience are dependent on social networks of influence, or conformity, to validate its authenticity. Christakis and Fowler (2010) argue that “connections to others affect our capacity for free will.” (p.32) In the complex relations of human social behaviour, cultural communities are an expressed collective unity of self. Ridley (1997) suggested that “society is an uneasy compromise between individuals with conflicting ambitions.” (p.260) These compromises are the result of selfishness, but are united under what Foucault (1982) refers to as the *power of relations* to create a common goal to benefit each individual self in a

community. “Relationship of power is that it be a mode of action upon actions. Power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted ‘above society’” (Foucault, 1982, p.8-26). One person’s actions are compounded with the next to create a social fabric that thus controls the unity of the core principles that shape individual perceptions on socially acceptable norms. It makes the self dependent on perceptions and harmonious relations that are woven into the fabric of the composed social context.

A key to creating a harmonious path to nature is in understanding that behaviour is a selfish act that is nevertheless dependent on social contexts. Longshoreman and Hoffer suggest that “when people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other.” (cited in Christakis & Fowler, 2010, p. 112) Matt Ridley (1997) elucidates that people do not do virtuous acts out of pure altruism, the acts are always done for the individual’s own selfish benefits. Sometimes doing for others, or doing what others are doing, is also beneficial to the individual. The organic farmer does not harvest crops in order to provide fresh vegetables to people out of pure motivation for the good of society; his ultimate purpose is a selfish act to provide for himself. In the end, the self cooperates with its surrounding social context to create an environment within which it can benefit the most. Harmony occurs as a by-product. In other words, the individual need to be a part of a social fabric, is aligned with selfish needs necessary for survival. Thus, social networks accomplish a framework for harmony amongst the interaction of individual selves.

Examples of positive by-products of harmonious social relations have turned up in worldwide studies of longevity research. Some interesting facts about happiness, longevity and social networks have emerged as inseparable from each other. Dan Buettner (2009) argues that along with other factors such as diet, family support, and sense of purpose, social relationships play a major role in longevity. In Okinawa, Japan, the worldwide *hot bed* of longevity, people are born into a small group of relations that they keep throughout the hard

times and good times in life. This group is called the *Moai*. Positive social relations are indispensable for our well-being and happiness. Interestingly, Christakis and Fowler (2010) have summarized how other studies have demonstrated that our social networks influence (positively or negatively) not only our close friends, but also acquaintances that we might not know personally. Hence, happiness leads to other happiness. “Social networks have value precisely because they help us to achieve what we could not achieve on our own ... tending to magnify whatever they are seeded with.” (Christakis & Fowler, 2010, p. 31) Therefore, if one’s friends and friends’ friends are living an active, healthy lifestyle, one will tend to be influenced by their behaviour. The same is also true for unhealthy lifestyles.

Harmony with Nature

How can people turn to harmony with nature as a path while finding a purpose for the selfish self? This purpose varies depending on life circumstances. A successful self can balance the two perceptions of harmony (well-being and happiness), adapt to social milieus and local cultural understanding of the environment while creating beneficial circumstances.

Perceiving nature

The perceptions of the *experience of an event*, and the perceptions of the *memory of an event* carry two different outcomes. Kahneman (2010), argues that between the two perceptions are vast consequences, as impacts the decision to participate in any future repetition of a similar event. This decision is based on the memory of an event, also known as the *memory self*, the decision making aid in our perceptual conscious. In particular, during the experiential stage of an event or activity, the living self (body) is 100% in the moment, it is influenced by both the conscious awareness and unconscious awareness. The conscious mind carefully focuses on certain stimuli, while fading out other stimuli by order of importance. For example, the

rising temperature of one's body caused from outside heat is dissipated by sweat (unconscious response), and eventually an individual becomes aware of the temperature change and takes off a layer of clothing to release heat (conscious response). On the other hand, the memory self, is under a different influence. Most of the outside stimuli are discarded as background noise, only the few stimuli we choose to pay attention to are then acknowledged by the remembering self. In the event, the most intense of the perceived sensory experiences creates a climax, which is then followed by the experience of the concluding moment of that particular. The experience of the concluding moment is usually the most remembered. The climax and the concluding moment cause the most impact and will carry the most weight in the formation of the memory. The result is a memory of the event that will carry all of the influence on the perception of, and further decisions about, similar events in the future. "The remembering self does more than remember and tell stories. It is actually the one that makes decisions" (Kahneman, 2010)

Harmony and the Story of Self

In essence, people narrate their own experience of nature (Kahneman, 2010). People narrate their stories of nature to find points that link each chapter (or aspect of their life) by using a framework of understanding. People with a predisposition towards wilderness and nature may find various frameworks of, or relating to, it in order to validate their experience. This is similar to what Kasser described with his needs-based theoretical framework of well-being and ecological sustainability (2009). Once an experience is identified with a certain behaviour or thought pattern, it is then grouped into paragraphs, forming a chapter, and then ultimately giving rise to the purpose of a person's story, reinforcing the purpose of their life.

Paragraphs of a person's life story that are commonly used for outdoor activities or activities in nature might include a healthy lifestyle perspective, a conviction for

environmental sustainability, or contact to creation through exposure to the elements. Each person's story has paragraphs with specific goals, and these goals are important for keeping the decision-maker memory anchored to a noble nature, and to the true plot of the story. The noble nature is a reminiscence of pleasurable experiences of first hand accounts of nature, that continuously pinpoint and reinforce the purpose of the experience. The noble nature is expressed as a place that is only within our perception. It is not necessarily the reality of the physical environment, but it is the creation of a memory in relation to it. The noble nature is in reference to the *noble savage theory*, a place where misguided symbolism (Pinker 2002, Hamilton 2003) and cinematographic nostalgia over-rides reality (Dippie 2010). People let themselves believe that nature has personal value or lack of it. In many ways, an individual's values are positive, by keeping the individual looking forward to the next experience. The noble nature memory works particularly well in situations where the individual would be exposed to positive nature experiences. As children grow up, formative experiences in nature with family members is an important step to understanding family and environmental relationships while creating good and positive memories. When contact with nature is part of a person's life story, the memory breeds actions, and actions lead to well-being. This process is described aptly by the self-reinforcing life course experienced by conservation volunteers in Guiney and Oberhausers' study (2009).

Questions arise though, about what happens when memories of nature start off wrong, or are never experienced at all? What anchors nature experience as the true place of harmony? In the case where memories have had negative effects on the well-being of the self, they may create a false sense of harmony or happiness.

Kahneman explains the negative consequences of experience and memory "as a tyranny of the remembering self ... dragging the experiencing self through experiences that the experiencing self doesn't need." (2010)

Perhaps well-being should not be confused with happiness. Perhaps well-being is a state, while happiness is an emotion. If this is the case, an emotion would need to be shared in order to be understood and authenticated. Since emotions are the product of memories, these products are to be shared with others or shared with nature (the surrounding environment). An emotion shared with nature is still a shared experience whether with other humans, animals, inanimate beings, or places. Certain factors either will impede or enhance certain experiences or memories of the relations with nature as being harmonious, exploitative or impartial.

The implication in the case of harmony with nature is that people do a whole variety of outdoor activities in the context of the remembering self with fewer thoughts to the importance of the experiencing self's well being. Although there are more and more cases of which the latter are taking the precedent. In a small isolated community in Northern Hokkaido, local people have formed nature healing groups, which emphasizes a 'well-being' in the moment of contact with natural surroundings. Likewise in Norway, the *friluftsliv* way has become known as the way of outdoor living for many people in which nature is interwoven throughout a person's life (Henderson & Vikander, 2007).

Westernized societies now live in an age of instant fulfilment of the memory self with fast paced media and many options for instant gratification. Screen-time through television, computer games and the internet has introduced direct access to the emotional peaks of the memory. Comparing fulfilment from media and fulfilment from nature, the rather slow pace of nature is a hard sell in most places, especially among younger generations. Børge Dahle, in understanding disappearing lifestyles closer to nature, sums it up with: "We can no longer assume, for example, that families go on walks on Sundays, as was the case was during my childhood — today there are many alternative leisure activities" (p.33).

Still, certain cultural communities enjoy slower paced nature experiences. What has caused these preferences? Exposure as children? Maturation? Past experiences? For the older generations in some societies, are these nature experiences of the past a by-gone era and are these generations now just clinging to a memory of the past in hopes for the return of the *good old days*? Are these older generations simply uninfluential in their role in society, or choosing to ignore that people perceive a new version of nature as it fits in today's changed world?

For the younger generation, to experience open expanses of wilderness as previous generations have done, it is now but a long lost dream in many places throughout the world. The reality is that vast wilderness areas have shrunk to limited spaces, with many areas designated as parks or conservation areas, and then treated as an exhibition or amusement park where one comes to experience nature in the same way they experience Disneyland. For instance, the Shiretoko Peninsula in Northern Japan, since becoming a World Heritage site in Hokkaido, has turned into a stop-and-go attraction on bus tours. After picture taking, the attraction is finished and thoughts turn to the next objective on the tour. The memory is left with the visceral experience of sitting on a bus, and nature is only remembered vicariously through a photograph. The spirit of the place is only captured in the paper reflections of the photograph, or on a digital screen. Whereas harmony with nature should take consideration of the time spent experiencing, and the memories associated with family bonds, friendships, home, and most of all through harmony creating an anchor as a *spirit of place*.

However, if the anchors of our experience are valued from the understanding that harmony with nature is also an ecological and environmental process (Guiney & Oberhauser, 2009; Kasser, 2009), they also take on a different meaning that is not directly linked to experiencing self and remembering self. These broader meanings include the culture and society within which individuals live.

Nature-Friendly-Living

To state: “There is no path to harmony with nature. Harmony with nature is the path” (Council for Eco-Philosophy), as a way to nature-friendly-living in the coming society, one must first identify certain parameters for understanding society. In which societies or cultures will this concept apply, and in which cultures will the implementation be possible? Defining the identity of *place as nature* by local perceptions, and the parameters of what nature constitutes, must be clear. Nature concepts are relevant and dependent on local cultural interpretation. However, not all societies are created equal, and not all groups or cultures within these societies have the same opportunities or inclination towards nature-friendly-living.

Through the use of recreational areas, many individuals, groups or cultures are finding ways to renew energies that associate nature as a place to re-create themselves. For people living within wilderness areas and directly dependent on nature, such as the Mongolian semi-nomadic culture, this concept of using nature as a recreational area is very foreign. Their relationship with nature is based on an adaptation perspective, where nature’s elements affect all aspects of their lifestyle on a daily basis. Basically, there is no time or thought towards recreation in nature, as it is typified in mainstream cultures, because nature is an innate aspect of daily living. On the other hand, many people in mainstream cultures practice or apply recreation time in nature through play-time on weekends. These excursions to nature places may even provide health and environmental benefits. However the questions remains: ‘What is stopping all people from living an harmonious outdoor lifestyle instead of just playing outdoors?’ In other words, why does nature seem to be the *other place* that is frequented on weekends, rather than a *characteristic of place* as defined through harmonious nature-friendly-living?

At present, only a small strand of human society can afford to implement in their lives the concept of healthy nature-friendly-living. The majority of human existence is too preoccupied with basic survival in more socially disadvantaged areas. Evidence shows that countries with richer social and economic resources tend to have better health of individual and populations (Wilkinson, 1996). Nevertheless, even within this small band of human society that is educated and wealthy enough to assume responsibility for its own harmonious nature lifestyle, very few choose to actively engage in it. For instance, this can be illustrated by the concept of *frilufsliv* as a healthy and social lifestyle in relation with nature. For cultures outside the circle of Norwegian influence, it is hard to grasp the context and the concept of *frilufsliv*. Presenting a rationale for creating a practical model of a cultural harmonious nature identity, like *frilufsliv*, in other communities or cultures might seem obvious to some and elusive to others. The basis lies within our decision-making process. By understanding human behaviour and social networks, one can imagine applicable, practical and harmonious nature-friendly-living systems that are unique for cultural and social variations.

In order to define nature-friendly-living, the starting point is the harmonious relation with the self, continuing progressively to include harmonious relations with society, and environment. To achieve this self-harmony, natural areas can be used as tools or gauges of progress. Natural areas can also be defined narrowly or broadly depending on context and culture. *Frilufsliv* may be a good example of a broad definition that applies to culture, context, and the environment, whereas a garden or city park may be good examples of other natural areas that are defined narrowly. In a very practical sense, city-dwellers working in their own small garden may be one way to come closer to harmony with nature. In this case, an essential aspect would include an area of practice that has cultural identity and acceptance, a *place with spirit*.

A place with spirit implies a kind of mystic heaven on earth protected by the users themselves while keeping destructive social behaviour out. The assumption that individual awareness alone will bring environmental changes on a large scale is, at best, wishful thinking since changes in society need a large threshold of selfish goals for the “exchange between enfranchised and empowered individuals is the best recipe for cooperation” (Ridley, 1997). The combined individual selfishness of a group of people, of a social network, will cause the changes.

The concept of *virtuous eco*, as a framework of environmental awareness, is simply what people will do for their own benefit resulting in a common behaviour that is a beneficial influence for the society and environment as a whole (Ridley, 1997). Ridley argues in his book entitled “The Origin of Virtue”, that our common beneficial actions are not deliberate attempts of altruism or selflessness, but rather a selfish desire to benefit. In some cases, this includes cooperation and limiting personal needs for those of the groups in order to stand the greatest chance to extract the benefits. Examples of this type of common behaviour, where the individual benefits along with the environment, is when people take walks in parks and forested areas for health reasons, or when people walk to the corner store for an errand. People who walk rather than drive may forego the individual convenience afforded by driving for a collective benefit to society; protection of the environment through the reduction of fuel consumption and exhaust emissions.

However there is also a pitfall or limitation to the virtuous eco. This occurs when people do what may be perceived as an environmentally friendly behaviour even though the behaviour may not be beneficial. Since patterns of behaviours are complex, and people often behave in certain ways for social acceptance or an immediate hedonistic feeling, they may be ignorant of the consequences that their behaviour can have which may have opposite effects to the perceived benefits to society as a whole. For example, the trendy word *eco* in consumer

advertisement has created a rush of confusion with respect to products and their environmentally friendly effects. Buying ethanol mixed gasoline does not guarantee an environmentally friendly purchase, when one considers the cost of growing the corn, the loss of a food source, and the use of hydrocarbons as a by-product of production. Despite these cautionary limitations, the virtuous eco does provide a compelling perspective that supports the rationale for nature-friendly-living.

Conclusion

Presently in many Western societies, self-centered individualism overrides social harmony or environmental harmony as a driving force in the culture (Seligman, 2006). On the surface, self-centeredness appears to be divergent to social cohesion, the preservation of the environment, and the best interest of an individual's well-being. However all may not be what it appears. Nature-friendly-living is a simple concept that also functions as a cross-cultural framework well suited for self-centered individualistic societies. It is well suited because it begins with the premise of selfishness as the driving force for personal well-being. Once directed through action, this selfishness can lead to a holistic approach to nature-friendly-living that is satisfying and self-reinforcing. Contact with nature as a way to generate a harmonious lifestyle based on the memory self, has a clear focus on creating joyful living while maintaining a healthy life.

Into the future, nature-friendly-living has a role to play in guiding actions within groups, cultures and societies. To this end, the importance of harmony with nature should be placed as a priority for individual participation in a social network that promotes healthy living – a trend beginning to be seen throughout the world. The focus should be on a cycle of influence that continuously feeds the social network through idea exchange and interactions

with nature that allow people to purposefully engage and nurture lifestyles that harmonize human relations within a natural environment.

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