

A Probe into the Link between Connectedness to Nature and Environmentally Sustainable Behaviour

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❖ **Abstract :**

Nature remains the foundation of mankind. However, owing to industrialization and technological advancement, the lifestyle of today's man has vastly changed. The human societies have become quite complex and diversified; and people's needs have been transformed. People at large, have become technology dependent and alienated from the natural environment. The present article delineates the concept of connectedness to nature and its significance in environmental sustainability. People's emotional affinity towards the nature and the inclusion of nature into the self are conceived of as connectedness to nature. The loss of connection with nature makes people indifferent toward environmental degradation and damage; whereas, the closeness shared with nature makes them empathetic and concerned about the natural world. Thus, one of the prerequisites of environmental education and protection may be the nurturing of nature connectedness among the individuals since their childhood. The emotional attachment shared with the nature will motivate the individual to practise sustainable behaviours and to refrain from environmentally destructive behaviours. The present article concludes with the statement of some suggestions for maintaining pro-environmental behaviours among people.

❖ **Key words :**

Connectedness to nature, environmental protection, environmental sustainability, pro-environmental behaviour.

In prehistoric times, people were completely immersed in nature, since the interaction with nature was crucial for survival. With the increasing complexity and diversification of human societies, social interactions became more important and sophisticated, and gradually replaced the human-nature relations. A barrier was erected between man and nature, and humans became alienated from nature. However, natural roots still remain the foundation of mankind. Cowie (2002) remarked, "Natural environments often generate experiences that combine great emotional and moral power charged experiences". According to the biophilia hypothesis by E. O. Wilson (1984), the predisposition to form an emotional connection to the natural environment is inherited, because such a connection has an adaptive value in the context within which humans evolve their defining characteristics. Connectedness to nature is a psychological construct which indicates the extent to which individuals include nature as part of their identity, feel integrated with nature, care for nature, and feel committed to protect the natural environment. Nature connectedness, therefore, can also be thought of as relatedness to nature, connectivity with nature, emotional affinity toward nature, or inclusion of nature into the self. It includes an understanding of nature and everything it is made up of, even the parts that are not pleasing.

Nature relatedness being a relatively stable individual trait can change based on one's experience with the nature. The longer an individual spends in nature, the more connected he or she becomes to nature and the more concern he or she may feel for nature. Feeling connected to nature at a state level has many benefits for the person as well, such as more positive moods and less negative moods, happiness and wellbeing. Connectedness to nature determines sustainable behaviour such as, pro-ecological behaviour, frugality, altruism, and equity (Barrera-Hernandez et al., 2020). Emotional attachment to the natural world has been found to influence an individual's future ecological behaviour and develops him into a more environmentally conscious citizen (Leopold, 1949; Orr, 1992; Sobel, 1996; Suzuki and McConnell, 2002; Thomashow, 1995). As the famous ecologist Leopold (1949) wrote years ago: 'We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.' Thus, ecological behaviour and environmental protection may be initiated and fostered by expanding our sense of self, that is, through inclusion of natural community into the self. Behaviour leading to destruction of this world will then be experienced as self-destruction (Roszak, 1995).

As Bryant and Hungerford (1977) have stated, people's attitudes towards natural environments are formed at a very young age; and, hence, they must be nurtured since childhood in a way so as to bring about positive changes in their attitudes. However, the modern lifestyles create a disconnection between people and the natural environment. The rapid increase of computer and video technology thrust upon children and youths, the competitive mindsets of the parents forcing their children into the 'rat race', and the complexities of the lifestyles, nowadays, are the reasons behind young individuals' alienation from nature. In today's competitive world, the youths must accept and adapt to new technology in order to contend for scholarships, higher institution placements, or better paying jobs. Hence, they are gradually adapted to spending more sedentary time indoors. As people no longer need to experience the world, an apathetic attitude towards how they interact with the nature tends to be cultivated in their minds. Consequently, such individuals become detached from nature day by day, and feel less responsibility to protect the environment. Rapid urbanization, technological advances, and decreased physical activities in association with disconnectedness with nature are the causes behind the increase in numerous health related consequences including diabetes, coronary heart disease, and obesity among people, nowadays. A substantial increase in obesity levels among urban, sub urban and rural children are noted.

The importance of feeling connected to nature has been stressed in the writings of both ecologists and eco-psychologists. Eco-psychology, as a sub-field of environmental psychology, describes the interface between ecology and psychology; and encompasses the psychological relationship shared by human and non-human creatures with nature, in both directions (Hill, 1999). Eco-psychology emphasizes that the needs of humans and nature are interdependent; and both complement each other. Hence, human health will suffer if nature does as well. Eco-psychologists attempt to trace the underlying motivations for people's bad environmental habits (Miller, 1994), and to create positive and affirming motivations among people, based on a bond of love and loyalty to nature (Bayland, 1995). There have been two focal points in the eco-psychological researches, one being the experimental learning aimed at helping people form a spiritual and emotional connection to the ecological systems of which they are a part, and the other has been an emphasis on small group, community, and face to

face contact as a way to bring about ecologically significant behaviour, and establish healthier relationships.

Man's concern for preservation and protection of his environment, that is, "environmentalism" is the outcome of the biophysical, economic and social impacts of technological innovations. The protection of environment has become even more significant after increased industrialization accompanying overdraw of natural resources and pollution of air, water, flora and fauna. However, Inglehart (1995) has optimistically affirmed that, as societies become more affluent, their members are less pre-occupied with the economic struggle for survival, and become free to pursue with what Inglehart labels post-materialistic goals such as, individual self fulfilment, and environmental protection. According to him, pro-environmental attitudes are part of a general change in fundamental values that takes place as societies develop.

An individual with pro-environmental attitudes would present strong concerns about the environment, active participation in environmental protection, and motivation for improvement (López-Bonilla and López-Bonilla, 2016; Ogunbode et al., 2018; Kopnina and Cocis, 2017; Hosseinnezhad, 2017b). It may be assumed that pro-environmental behaviour will follow favourable changes in attitudes in favour of environment. However, this has not always been the case. The general pro-environmental attitudes are not always found to be related to specific pro-environmental behaviour (Heberlein and Black, 1976).

Pro-environmental behaviour involves actions at individual or group level for enhancing and improving environmental quality beyond the living space, reducing environmental damage and alleviating the degradation of natural environment, maintaining natural environment for the coexistence of humans and ecology, and solving certain environmental problems. Pro-environmental behaviours such as, reduced energy consumption, waste management, recycling, avoidance of littering, and environmental activism contribute towards environmental sustainability. Sustainability implies meeting the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. A sustainable society restores, preserves, and enhances nature and culture for the benefit of all life in present and in future. People's economic support or resistance behaviours such as, avoiding products which would result in pollution, and resisting manufacturers who hinder environmental protection may also protect the environment. Moreover, people may tell others about the actions to solve environmental problems, and persuade them to refrain from environmentally damaging behaviours.

The promotion and maintenance of pro-environmental attitude and subsequent environment friendly behaviour may be based on imparting environmental education to people since childhood. Environmental education is a holistic and lifelong learning process directed at creating awareness about environmental problems among individuals, and enabling them to explore and identify environmental issues, and plan suitable problem solving strategies to handle those issues. Consequently, such individuals learn to assume responsibility, and acquire necessary information and effective skills to resolve the environmental challenges. Furthermore, they will be motivated to prevent unwanted changes in the ecosystems and their constituent parts resulting from changes associated with human activities, conserve natural resources, prevent misuse of perishable natural resources and the existing natural environment, repair damage and reverse trends as and when possible, create a healthy environment free from dust, germ, and other elements that cause many hazardous diseases, maintain per-

sonal hygiene and environmental sanitation, cultivate awareness about population growth and explosion, environmental pollution and degradation, and inculcate integrated knowledge regarding environmental restoration.

The present discussion concludes with the statement of some suggestions for maintaining pro-environmental behaviour, which are as follows :

- To increase the rewards (financial or non-financial incentives) for beneficial behaviour.
- To reduce any delay between detrimental behaviour and the penalty.
- To increase the control of government over illegal behaviour.
- To organize information campaigns including prompts (brief signals like ‘please do not litter’), contests, seminars and workshops from the grass root level, that is, school.

The campaigns are assumed to enhance individuals’ problem solving skills, critical and creative thinking, self learning, skills of communication and teamwork, which may eventually help them become effective environmental actors.

- To use modeling technique, that is, to introduce successful people as the role models, to generate public interest and awareness, and remove public apathy towards environmental issues.
- To implement behaviour modification technique using the following steps:
- To select a particular group of people for the intervention, as opposed to changing the behaviour of ‘everyone’.
- To target a specific behaviour (for example, waste management) to be changed that will improve the quality of the environment.
- To examine the primary factors underlying the behaviour to be changed.
- To design and apply an intervention programme to change the behaviour so as to reduce its environmental impact.
- To evaluate rigorously the effects of the intervention on the behaviour and also on the quality of environment and human life.
- To provide feedback and rewards to the participants regarding behaviour modification.

It may, therefore, be inferred that a lack of connection with nature may contribute to people’s apathy toward environmental degradation and protection (Pyle, 2003); whereas, a close bond shared with nature may foster empathy for the natural world. As Mayer and Frantz (2004) have stated, an individual’s connection with nature may motivate him to

engage in pro-environmental behaviour. It is noteworthy that as not all individuals and communities respond to pro-environmental interventions equally well, the psychologists are required to collaborate with the experts in marketing to target the potential consumers who will respond to a particular intervention better than they do to others. If the interventions are tailored to fit the needs of individuals and communities, the chances of success will increase, which may lead to a long-term behavioural change.

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