

# “NATURE”

*It's more complicated than you think.*

## The social construction of nature

- “Nature” does not refer to an objective, universal object. It is not a “given.” Different cultures, different historical periods, different people “construct” in their imagination that which “nature” refers to. In many cultures, there isn’t even a word for what we call “nature.”
- The question then becomes: how does this culture, period, social group, or person imagine the transhuman world and the human relationship to it?
- Each construction involves different concepts of what that transhuman world is, what its reality is, how it operates, what our relationship to it is, what value it has, etc.

## Three fundamental meanings (the first two are characteristic of the West)

1. **DUALISTIC:** Nature as what is not human or cultural, or not disturbed by humanity and society.
  - *Essentially, humans are distinct from nature.*
  - *Nature versus human & culture: that which has been created or manipulated by people.*
  - *This building and plastic and nuclear waste are not natural*
  - *Cultural products & subjective experience are not part of nature.*
2. **MONISTIC:** Nature as everything in the phenomenal world. For the most part, this includes all that can be studied by the “natural” sciences.
  - *Essentially, humans are fully part of nature.*
  - *Nature versus the supernatural.*
  - *This building and plastic and nuclear waste are natural.*
  - *Cultural products and subjective experience are part of nature as we are part of nature, although not analyzable by science and not part of the objective world of nature “out there.”*
3. **ADVERBIAL:** “Natural” refers to acting according to your true nature. All things have their distinctive, inherent nature. When they act spontaneously according to their nature, they are natural, and this leads to harmony and order. Humans, however, because of will and reason, can act in various ways. Usually they act on their will, desire, and prejudices. In doing so, they diverge from their true nature, which leads to disorder and disharmony. The goal is to realize one’s true nature and act spontaneously. This is the traditional Chinese perspective, and it shapes Bashō’s view of nature.
  - *Essentially, humans are fully part of nature, but they can act against their nature*
  - *The key distinction is between natural spontaneous action versus forced, artificial, purposive, intentional action*

## Four different formulations

1. **Nature as “COLLECTION”**: this particular set of organisms, our current biodiversity and biogeography (what is growing where, individual ecosystems), and the abiotic conditions.
  - *Individualistic view: give primacy to individuals (trees, animals) as discrete and independent beings.*
  - *Aggregation: nature as this particular set of organisms, our current biodiversity and biogeography (what is growing where, individual ecosystems), and the abiotic conditions.*

### **Policy with nature as “collection”**

- *Value individuals over populations, species, ecosystems.*
- *Keep individual plants and animals alive.*
- *Attempt to preserve an ecosystem just as it is – keep it from changing (includes fighting all fires).*
- *Keep populations of animals from declining, expanding, or migrating.*
- *More likely to see nature as collection of resources to exploit, but also can support animal rights.*

2. **Nature as “WEB”**: the interconnectedness of life. Plants and animals exist as part of a biotic community, and they interact with the physical environment as part of an ecosystem.
  - *“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe” (John Muir)*
  - *Each thing has its particular “niche” (role) in the system.*
  - *Species, populations, and ecosystems are the priority, not individual organisms.*
  - *A forest is not a collection of trees but a community of interdependent organisms, each with a specific role in the ecosystem.*

### **Policy with nature as “web of relationships”**

- *Biodiversity is the main criterion for determining the health of the ecosystem*
- *Identify how things are interrelated, and which species are most important to the system (“keystone species”).*
- *Preserve the integrity of the community and the ecosystem (rather than individual organisms), focusing on the whole but attending to the most important species. Thus protect predators and prey, especially predators.*
- *Eliminate invasive species that substantially alter the ecosystem*

3. **Nature as “PROCESS”**: a set of “natural” processes not caused by humans.
  - *This includes fires, forest succession, periodic infestations, periodic droughts, “natural extinction,” etc.*

### **Policy with nature as “web of relationships”**

- *Let forests change or regenerate through natural processes of periodic fire, succession, etc., but fight against “unnatural” degradations, such as massive fires caused by build-up of debris, clear-cutting the rain forest, etc.*
- *Let population dynamics occur (but this requires maintaining predators); but fight against human-caused species extinctions.*

4. **Nature as “GAIA”**: the long-range conditions, processes, and occurrences.
  - *Defined by a particular level of oxygen and temperature range.*
  - *The “natural” includes ice ages, huge volcano eruptions, or super-fires, and massive extinctions.*
  - *Massive changes, such as global warming, and major human impacts, such as a huge dam, are irrelevant.*

### **Policy with nature as “Gaia”**

- *Huge dams, strip mining, global warming: “nature doesn’t care.”*
- *“Chill out, man, everything’s always the way it’s supposed to be.”*