

TEN ELEMENTS IN NATURE WRITING

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What are the key features of nature writing? What does nature writing consist of? What is “nature writing”? These questions can be answered in various ways. Below is one way: a list of ten elements. Many, sometimes all, of these elements are found in a work of nature writing, though always in distinctive articulations, emphases, and interrelationships. As you read a work of nature writing, note which elements appear at different places, which ones predominate, and how they relate to each other.

For an in-depth discussion of these elements in relation to “taxonomies” of nature writing, see my “**Surveying the Landscape: A New Approach to Nature Writing.**” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 17.2 (Spring 2010): 1-18. At the end of the article I review how these elements appear in Wendell Berry’s wonderful essay, “A Native Hill.”

1. ACCOUNTS OF NATURE

- **Scientific accounts:**
 - Natural history of species & places
 - General scientific theories of nature
- **Descriptions of particular scenes**

2. Accounts of PERSONAL EXPERIENCE in nature. This element can be further analyzed into several variables.

- **Solitary**
- **With other individuals:** lovers, family, friends, fellow activists, etc.

3. The SOCIAL EXPERIENCE OF NATURE. Nature writing is not limited to the author’s personal experience of the natural world. It also can concern reflections on the experience of nature within the context of a human society, and the experience of social relations within the context of nature. There are at least four main ways that nature writers discuss the social experience of nature.

- **Present communities:** relationships of contemporary community, whether it is the author’s (e.g., Wendell Berry’s rural Kentucky) or one different from the author’s (e.g., Wendell Berry on the Amish)
- **History:** historical reflections of past generations, their relationship to the land, and their impact on the present.
- **Cultural ecology.** The subject is the relationship to nature of cultures other than the dominant white society. (e.g., Momaday and Silko)
- **Imaginary communities:** including science fiction or other forms of speculative fiction (e.g., *Always Coming Home*)

4. A PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE, including views of

- **Metaphysical views of nature:** what it consists of, how it works
 - *How it works and is put together (dynamic web of interrelationships)*
 - *Organic? Supernatural?*
- **Ontological status:**
 - *Subjecthood?*
 - *Sacred?*
- **Ethical relation to nature**
 - *Intrinsic value of nature*
 - *Ethical responsibility and/or care the natural world*

5. An ECOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY, or perhaps a natural philosophy of the mind.

- **Descriptive:** The way the human consciousness is
 - related to the natural world
 - aware of, has knowledge of, and responds to nature.
- **Normative:** Ideal forms of consciousness
 - Moments of intuitive communion with nature

- Abiding sense of identity with nature
 - Sense of place
 - Sense of the planet

6. LANGUAGE, KNOWLEDGE and their relation to the natural world. Ecophilosophy of language and ecoepistemology.

- **Descriptive:**
 - the nature of language and its relation to the natural world
 - the different forms of knowledge of nature
- **Normative:**
 - how we ought (& ought not) to use language
 - ideal form of knowledge of nature (can blend with ideal consciousness)

7. PHILOSOPHY OF THE HUMAN

- **Descriptive:**
 - Human nature
 - Our essential relation to nature
 - Our essential relation to other humans
 - The status of “society” (social contract?); the notion of “civilization”
- **Normative:**
 - Value of other people and groups, including future generations
 - Ethics toward other people and social groups

8. ECOSOCIAL PHILOSOPHY. This element includes critique – reflections on the nature, extent, and causes of negative human impact on the natural world – as well as speculations on the ecosocial ideal.

- **Critique:** of society, economics, politics, and behavior toward nature
 - Of particular policies and practices
 - Of institutions and structures and forces
 - Of ideologies
- **Ideal:** of society, economics, politics, and behavior toward nature
 - Particular policies and practices
 - Institutions and structures and forces
 - Ideologies

9. PRAXIS. This element concerns actions taken in response to the experiences, ideas, and values outlined in the previous elements. There are several main types.

- **Resistance.** Included here are various forms of protest, obstruction, and other forms of resistance, from letter writing to monkey-wrenching, against ecological destruction and environmental injustice.
- **Enacting the ideal:**
 - At the individual level
 - *Particularistic.* Ecological restoration, community supported agriculture, and solitary walks in the wilderness are some of the many possible specific actions that **can** be taken to enacting the values and ideals noted above.
 - *Holistic.* Holistic actions center on ways of life, from solitary withdrawal to intentional communities.
 - At the social level
 - *Pragmatic, reformist*
 - *Radical, utopian*

10. SPIRITUALITY. This element includes both traditional religious beliefs (e.g., Christianity, Buddhism) and more general difficult-to-define “nature spirituality.” It is related to other elements, since it involves a certain state of mind and emotions (ecopsychology) and religious view of nature (philosophy), and it usually strongly impacts the social and political dimensions. Depictions of personal experience often manifest the spiritual perspective of the author.