

Two Views of Nature

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Traditional Western View

Humans are separate from and above nature and other species; humans are not subject to the same laws as other species.

There is no connection between an individual species and its habitat.

Human can and should conquer and dominate nature and other species.

All other species are here for humans to use and exploit; other species are to be viewed as commodities, things, property, and natural resources that are here to serve our interests (in the same way that we see iron ore or crude oil as resources).

More is better; bigger is better; faster is better.

"There is always more where that came from." Nature is inexhaustible.

Growth = progress = good

We can and do own the earth and other species that inhabit it.

Nature is chaotic and dangerous and must be tamed.

Nature is arranged in a hierarchy from top to bottom with humans at the top, then more complex mammals, then "simpler" animals, then plants, then microorganisms, then dirt, rocks, water, air. Humans are a higher form of life than anything else on earth; nothing else is as good as humans.

It makes sense to try to bend nature to our will by the application of power: a building that overpowers the elements by bigger air conditioning units, heaters, ventilation fans, etc. makes more sense than a building that tries to go with nature by using natural lighting, passive solar heating and cooling, and natural ventilation.

NonWestern View*

Humans are part of nature; we are part of the web of life; what we do to the earth we do to ourselves.

Humans are custodians/guardians of the earth; we do not own nature, it is entrusted to us to take care of and pass on (like a book checked out from the library).

We should live in harmony with nature by trying to understand how it operates.

Each species has its own excellences and makes its own contribution to the balance and well being of the planet.

Nature is orderly; we must understand that order to survive and thrive.

Everything in nature is interconnected and interdependent; what we do to other species and habitats affects us.

We should seek to work with the balance of nature: A surfer does not control or dominate the wave he or she is riding, but by understanding the forces at play the surfer can go with the wave and enjoy it and be in a position to enhance his or her life. The surfer is using a renewable resource in a way that leaves just as much for others who come along later and does not throw the environment out of balance or damage it with pollution. Contrast this with the person who roars around in the desert on a gas powered all terrain vehicle or uses a speed boat on a lake.

We should not completely discount the welfare of other life forms simply because they are not member of our species or do not look like us or behave like us.

*This view is characteristic of many native cultures, including Native Americans, and is also exemplified in eastern traditions such as Taoism and Buddhism. Elements of it can also be found in the stoic philosophy of Epictetus.