

Last Child in the Woods?

Errors and misunderstandings about
our daily relationship to nature

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Nature is an elementary medium of life. It is part of our environment, and we are part of nature. Given our relationship to nature we should be perfect experts by experience. Are we really? Or has our high-tech world drawn us away too far from nature? Is the common picture of our role in the natural world correct? As documented in www.natursoziologie.de, some sociological research reveals astonishingly wrong stereotypes in this field:

Contact to nature lost?

In 2005 a famous American journalist stirred up the public with his book “Last Child in the Woods – Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit-Disorder”. Richard Louv documented in a drastic way how little American children and their parents have in their minds about nature. Under the motto “Leave No Child Inside” he initiated a “Children and Nature Movement” that influenced institutions and local movements in many states.

On the German market his book was published 6 years later, but the translation of the cover title into “Das letzte Kind im Wald” sounds rather strange to German readers. Nevertheless the question is: Do his findings cover the German situation as well?

Only partly. In the context of the studies “Jugendreport Natur” 2006 and 2010 more than 1000 12 to 15 year olds were asked “How often were you in the woods last summer?” About a third marked “several times per week”, another third “several times per month”. The number of contacts regarding fields and gardens were even higher.

The frequency of being in the woods logically depends on the distance between the place of residence and the next wood. But even 50% of children living in towns said they were in the woods at least once a month. So the problem isn't the lack of contact. More decisive seems to be the finding of "Jugendreport Natur" that nature appears simply too boring for overstimulated young people.

Longing for wilderness?

Wilderness seems to be the heart of nature. The creation of more and more national parks is believed to be the answer to an alleged longing for wilderness in an environment that has become more and more artificial. Evolutionary biologists assume that there is an innate love to nature ("biophilia") that is especially relevant for young people. Are we on the way back to the roots or do we just follow the American myth of romanticizing wilderness?

In fact, wilderness has got a high ranking position in German surveys. Up to 80% of the participants of the "Jugendreport Natur" show sympathy for expressions like "unberührte Natur" (virgin nature), "Wildnislandschaft" (landscape of wilderness), "wilde Natur" (wild nature), "wilder Wald" (wild forests) or "heimische Urwälder" (indigenous primeval forests). The term "wilderness" as such is differently accepted - without any addition by considerably more than 50%, in connection with activities like expeditions by less than 50%. The idea of just walking through the wilderness is much less attractive - preferred by only 15% of interviewees in all age groups. Obviously modern people don't like being too close in touch with wilderness.

Asked in surveys like the "Jugendreport Natur" or the official "Naturbewusstseinsstudie" (study on the consciousness of nature) for nondirected ideas and associations that go with the term "Natur" or "Naturschutz" (nature protection) wilderness only plays a marginal role. The term is mentioned only in a few per mille of the free answers. When not explicitly asked for, wilderness doesn't seem to be present in our minds. There is no strong longing for it, as often claimed.

Instead we prefer just the opposite. More than 90% of our fellow citizens want nature to be clean and orderly. Regardless of age, sex or education no other feature gets a higher ranking. Every second is even of the opinion that taking away rotten trees and branches is good for the forest which is clearly against the common standards of nature protectionists. Should nature look like the living room of a Swabian housewife? Does wilderness appear in the end too natural, too untidy, even too dangerous for us?

Exploiter or Samaritans ?

Although we all live on their products, farming and forestry are no thrilling topics of the media. If they come up, mostly threatening images from the view of environmentalists are published: profit oriented damaging of the landscape, depriving the soil of its natural nutrients, using monumentally huge machines etc. Are those people who mainly work in nature like farmers or foresters, really regarded as the great violators of nature?

This is not easy to decide, because for most people the economic use of nature is not a question of any importance. Asked for spontaneous associations going with the term "nature", neither teenagers nor adults mention any crops, livestock nor running farms

or forests. The same desideratum is characteristic for free associations on nature protection: Nearly nobody thinks in this context of the production of food or other natural products. Their prevalent importance for us seems to be suppressed, an issue behind the everyday horizon.

On the other hand, explicitly approaching the subject, farmers and foresters are held in high esteem. In the latest “Jugendreport Natur”, about 50% of young Germans believe farmers and even 80% foresters as being respectful to nature. Only 10% articulate the opposite opinion.

Adults don't see things differently. In a representative survey including more than 3.000 German people 80% accepted the statement “The forest warden's first priority is to care for and protect the wood with its habitat of animals and plants.” This image of modern samaritans is not only based on picture books for children. Given the success of a magazine like “Landlust” (1 million copies), there seems to be a nostalgic longing for an orderly intact world even in the world of adults.

Nature always good?

For more than 90% of our contemporaries nature primarily is a preferred place for leisure activities. In a beautiful landscape our body and even more our soul can recover optimally. Therefore some scientists call it a “psychotope”. But nature has also a different side. In the media huge natural catastrophes are always big topics. Therefore everyone should know how dangerous nature can become even in times of high-tech control. Is that in our mind?

Rarely. The majority of the interviewees didn't feel any threat by nature. Three quarters marked statements like “Natural things are always good” or “Nature would be quiet and peaceful if human beings didn't disturb it”. Although one could mark neutral and negative answers the mystification of nature in industrialized countries causes the acceptance of those inappropriate statements. Apart from the lack of biological knowledge this is a serious sign of estrangement of nature.

Country children different?

Every time there is horrible news about the lack of nature knowledge among young people, there only seems to be one consolation: This is very likely due to the living condition in our towns, but it should be different in the countryside. Is this really the case?

This is true as children living in the countryside have more experience with nature insofar as they more often go into fields and woods. But this is generally valid: The closer young people's homes are to woods and fields, the more they go and the better they feel there. This applies to children in towns and villages.

The “Jugendreport Natur 2010” focused on rather practical questions about farming and forestry. Country kids answered only 3 out of 17 questions more correctly. Town kids were better in one. The difference is unexpectedly small.

Even more identical in the comparison of the two groups is the general image of and the approach to nature. There is only one exception: Because of their personal rela-

relationship young people living in the countryside hold forest wardens and hunters (but not farmers) in higher esteem than town kids. But the understanding of conservation and sustainability is similarly vague. It is obvious that for young people the general idea of nature as an object of value is not based on the level of experience but on other sources like media or school.

Young people troublemakers?

They are the usual suspicious: If there is rubbish in the woods it must have been dumped by young people. They are also held responsible for disturbing the calmness in the woods. Do they have really no feeling for the need of relaxation of adults?

As far as known there are no well founded field studies of the behavior of young people in the woods. Common experience hints more at car-driving adults as the main source of noise and rubbish.

According to young people as to adults there is no more serious offence one can think of than throwing rubbish into the forest. Asked about free ideas to the conservation topic, a quarter of all young interviewees think spontaneously of rubbish, whereas of conservation of species only 6%, of farming 2% and of sustainability 0.3%. Asked explicitly for their opinion, about 97% are convinced that litter harms the forest. About 85% say that disciplining oneself not to throw away litter is the most important factor to respect the rules of conservation and sustainability, and they will stick to it themselves.

But more than 50% admit having broken that principle in the past (position Nr.1 in the ranking of sins against nature). On the other hand 40% say that they have already collected rubbish voluntarily (position Nr. 1 in the ranking of good deeds for nature).

Similarly clear is the relationship to stillness in the wood. Three quarters of all generations state that they enjoy it. This is particularly amazing for young people, because they are surrounded by music all day. Indeed, asked directly about it, 50% prefer listening to music with headphones when walking through the landscape – for instance when they have to accompany their parents. But most of them avoid playing loud music, this seems to be too embarrassing. Who nevertheless does so, isn't popular with his mates.

Connection between nature and science?

In the media the topic nature is closely connected to science. Conservationists and environmentalists mainly refer to science as their main access to nature. At school from the age of 12 nature is exclusively taught from the view of science. Is this view the only way to understand nature?

Not at all! The results of research on the idea of nature in everyday life look quite different. Non directed associations for "nature" only refer in 1% of all statements to scientific interpretations or terms. Even students of science very rarely associate nature spontaneously with the subject of their university courses.

On the other hand, what comes to your mind when thinking of nature are animals, plants and landscape scenes. More important: In contrast to science this is mostly connected with emotions and personal experiences.

Asked directly how much science lessons at school contribute to the understanding of nature, 80% of adults named biology, 60% geography and 30% physics and chemistry. Pupils even came to lower percentages. The question about subjects in which they learned most about nature came up with similar results. 40% of the adults and 50% of the young people stated to have learned little or nothing about nature in physics or chemistry. Obviously nature in these subjects is not recognizable for them.

Valid idea of nature?

What exactly is nature? Apart from scientific perceptions there is no binding agreement about the definition of nature. Scientists don't answer this central question at all. Philosophers can't agree on a common definition. Some of them are convinced that there is no consistent definition possible. Should we stop brooding about this term at all?

Of course not. Without it civilized western societies would miss a focal point of orientation and self-assertion. Instead we have to find out the core of the problem. It is the status of humans in the framework of what we call nature that is not unambiguously clear. Does man belong to nature? Conservationists tend to say no, most people say yes or at least partly. But which parts of us belong to nature, which organs, which activities? In the end it is our cultural or personal idea of mankind which decides what we define as nature. And that means that there will never be a generally accepted definition.

What are the consequences of this fundamental insight? Those who want to do justice to the topic "nature" in everyday life must integrate human beings into it. As far as the classical sciences excluded them, this simplification was the main reason of their tremendous success. But at the same time they restricted their area of research and insight. To let them be the master of the definition would be a gross error.

When it comes to nature, we shouldn't restrict our focus to science. We also need social science, psychology and humanities. But full of respect for the overwhelming science, these subjects still prefer not to step on the field of nature.

Most confident in that direction has been philosophy so far. But the philosophy of nature has – like the media – put itself on the lead of science. In the last decades, as part of the environmental psychology in the USA a sort of nature psychology was established to explore the relationship man-nature. Because of its concentration on aspects of civilization the environment psychology in Germany has missed this development up to recently.

Sociology of nature is in a similar situation. For German sociologist it took a decade after the first "Jugendreport Natur", to start their first survey about the attitudes of adults toward nature. Hopefully it can clarify some of the errors outlined in this article.