

# **WHAT IS NATURE? CULTURAL CONCEPTS, LOCAL REPRESENTATIONS, CONSTRUCTION, DECONSTRUCTION, POLITICAL AND MARKETING STRATEGIES OF HUMANITY'S OLDEST QUESTION.**

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*In the session we want to investigate, in both conceptual and political terms, the meaning of the “natural” in contemporary society. Contributions to the discussion can range from the construction of artificial/natural environments (bio-parks, protected areas, museums of nature); to the politics of environmentalism; to the consumption, marketing and conservation of nature nowadays and in the past; to the change of attitude towards the non-human world; to the definition of nature in ethic, aesthetic and historical categories. Case studies on conceptualization of nature in different cultural contexts are particularly appreciated.*

*To participate to the session, please submit here titles and abstracts.*

# **WHAT IS NATURE? CULTURAL CONCEPTS, LOCAL REPRESENTATIONS, CONSTRUCTION, DECONSTRUCTION, POLITICAL AND MARKETING STRATEGIES OF HUMANITY'S OLDEST QUESTION.**

The title I'm presenting here was meant as a proposal for a session. The session got lost in the meanders of global communication, in the web-links between the Mediterranean and the Far East, namely Italy and Taegu.

The title is a quote from Kate Soper and the purpose was to investigate, in both conceptual and political terms, the meaning of the "natural" in contemporary society. The topics I considered ranged from the construction of artificial/natural environments (bio-parks, protected areas, museums of nature); to the politics of environmentalism; to the consumption, marketing and conservation of nature nowadays and in the past; to the change of attitude towards the non-human world and the definition of nature in ethical, aesthetic and historical categories. The idea was to confront case studies on different concepts of nature, and especially here in Korea, ideas of nature in East Asian thought.

Just from the reality of a mosaic of case studies we can grasp the "unparalleled field of difference", in Harvey's words, of nature's meanings.

To condense now, in a single paper, such a wide and complex subject seems to me preposterous. I will just consider here an example, adding then some more general comments.

The human-nature relationship is one of the oldest and much-discussed multi-disciplinary themes, backed up by a huge literature. Nature's idea ambiguity comes out just by trying to define it: in the words of Torsten Haegerstrand, nature is:

"The world to which our bodies belong, (...) in which hundreds of specialised sciences have identified millions of items, phenomena and relationships, rendered in a confusion of tongues. How can any sane person dare to confess a hope that he can say something about how to view Nature as a wholeness?" (Haegerstrand, 1976, p.329).

Nowadays the problem present itself in discursive terms, embedded in the difficulty of situating precisely the border between the natural and the artificial and in the new emphasis on nature-cultural heritage in conservation. As Harvey observes:

"The contemporary battleground over words like "nature" and the "environment" is a leading edge of political conflict, precisely because of the "incompletely explicit assumptions, or more or less unconscious mental habits," which surround them. And it is, of course, primarily in the realms of ideology and discourse where "we become conscious of political matters and fight them out" (Harvey, 1996, p.118)

Nature's concepts are never politically or socially neutral. Neil Smith comments:

"It is in the production of nature that use-value and exchange value, and space and society are fused together" (Smith, 1990, p.32).

To take just one example, we can consider the institution of National Parks, often seen both as a prerequisite and a solution for the sustainable development of our planet. If we

accept the idea that nature is socially constructed, protected areas express a complex of traditions, myths and beliefs, as well as an ecological balance.

All conservation policies, in fact, imply a perspective on the relations between humans and nature, though this perspective is seldom explicitly identified: rarely are the questions 'What is to be preserved?' 'Why?' and 'For whom?' raised in any serious way.

The U.S. world National parks system, - probably the most famous - is mainly the expression of a North American concept, based on a conflicting relationship between nature and people. The extraordinary potential of public use of the concept of nature, inspired by American civic improvers such as Frederick Olmstead, became lost at the very start of the development of the National Park idea. Olmstead was charged with the implementation of New York's Central Park, authorized in 1853. Ten years later, he applied the same principles to the management of Yosemite Valley, granted by Congress to the state of California as a public park in 1864.

National Parks reflect the array of political, cultural, social and technological forces that have shaped American national history. Foresta argues that the US National Parks System was not invented but rather was fortuitous.

“The reality beneath the image is that neither the national parks nor their keepers stand apart from their times; they are very much subject to the problems and dilemmas of modern American life” (Foresta, 1984, p.2)

The result is a very unsystematic System. In addition to National Parks, it includes at least a dozen other categories, from the “crown jewels”, Yellowstone and Yosemite, to The Capitol in Washington D.C., to the National Battlefields, with a total of some 357 areas.

Each unit of the system embodies a definition (or idealization) of nature. Each relates to a set of social values (Benton, Short, 1999). Management policies assume that the ecology of a particular moment in the past can be 'frozen' in the present, ignoring social and power relationships, and the dynamic nature of human society. This is particularly reflected in implied concepts of 'wilderness' and the 'natural'.

For those two fundamental aspects, the Mediterranean concept of National Parks contrasts with the US ideal. The ‘wilderness myth’ clashes with the biblical idea of human dominion over nature and of the well-kept Mediterranean garden (White, 1967). For example, if we study, a map of the distribution of the National Parks in the Mediterranean area, we will notice that very few of them are coastal or marine parks. More often, they are situated in mountain areas, as Corsica’s extensive park, where tourist demand is not so heavy. In Greece, only 8% of national parks is “Mediterranean”; the equivalent Greek term to park means “deciduous oak forest” and protection strategies, imported from Bavarian architects, considered, at first “real forests only”, ignoring all Mediterranean type vegetation (Margaris, 1991, p.406).

In Japan, National Parks are often cultural landscapes of great beauty, managed and modified by humans from ancient times: temples are enshrined harmonically in the wilderness; protected areas correspond mostly with sacred spaces, centers of nature/culture dialectics.

The consequence, for those “imported –structures” – as Richez has defined National Parks in Europe or in Asia and Africa - is often an absence or confusion of purpose and a lack of effectiveness in management.

Protected areas are often seen as an end in themselves, as “wilderness islands”, created and defined to compensate for the exploitation of land, landscape and nature, outside their boundaries. National Parks originated in a definite time and space. They mainly

reflect a spatial concept of nature conservation: to circumscribe an area of untouched wilderness, “other” in respect to the human, and to preserve it for the enjoyment of future generations.

This philosophy dominates policies and nature management strategies all over the world, yet it often fails. It does not respond to the mosaic of differences of other cultural and historical contexts. In ancient historical regions, landscape is the product of centuries of human-nature interrelations. A different model of conservation could be assumed: a temporal concept, where not only wilderness is preserved, but also the long and indissoluble history of nature-human relations, the continuity of rural life and of traditional life with/in nature.

I would just like now to add some comments on one particular point, which looks particularly challenging to me, and which I would have liked to discuss here.

If we are living in “new global times”, in Taylor, Watts and Johnston definition, “qualitatively different from the past” (Taylor, Watts and Johnston, 1990, p.6-7) how are changing nature concepts, in the “great vortex” of globalization?

Are we heading towards “the end of nature”, as in Mc Kibben millenaristic threat, or are we “nature’s keepers” according to the more positive view of species – like horses and deer - are considered more valuable than others – like rats or insects - with local changing preferences. All over the world, ecological science is full of cases of nature’s complex dynamics, dominated by Budiansky, or we are, ourselves, part of nature evolutionary process?

Our experience of nature, our conception of nature, are always mediated by culture. As Edgar Morin has put it:

All that speaks of nature speaks of society. The ‘conquest of nature’, the ‘return to nature’ are the most social of social ideas (Morin, 1980, p.130).

Major environmental concerns, however, often have seemingly straightforward technical solutions, based on science. Nature management always implies a choice, mediated by culture. It is always a question of what to save what to put back, what to take apart.

Humans, as modifying agents in Marsh terms, had always been selectively choosing and constructing their environments under the pressure of need, or of market and fashion. All ecosystems imply an always-changing balance of human intervention and of natural processes. Some parts of nature and some species –like horses and deer- are considered more valuable than other –like rats or insects – with local changing preferences. All over the world, ecological science is full of cases of nature complex dynamics, dominated by human preferences. In the English countryside, reports Budiansky, rabbits, an invading species, are maintaining the low prairies of wild thymian, the ideal habitat of the rare blue butterfly, in extinction. What is more natural: to leave the rabbits, or eliminate them, consenting the growth of vegetation, but threatening the survival of the butterflies? In our time, the role of human intervention is accelerating and becoming more extensive, with generally not foreseeable consequences, like habitat destruction and pollution, and loss of bio-diversity.

Urban and technological society had, not only selected but, de facto, excluded the animal and vegetable world from its daily experiences and rhythms.

What kind of relationship can we establish, nowadays, with wildlife, with forests and wolves, when, thanks to conservation politics, they become again our often tedious and uncomfortable neighbors?

The preferences of the society of tomorrow, in fact, could be oriented, also in esthetical terms, towards the artificial, more than the natural: cityscapes, theme parks, video-games and virtual reality demonstrate it. The disquieting setting of a world without nature is provocatively presented by Donna Haraway, inspired by life in North American suburban areas: we are all becoming cyborgs, hybrids of organisms and machines (Haraway, 1995, p.41).

The extraordinary tourist success of theme parks and of bio-domes, seems to confirm this preference and to deny the easy blame of phony-environments, in the name of a past golden age of ecological balance. Nature has just to be purified from diseases, violence and insects and beautified.

“in this sense, writes Kate Soper, nature may be viewed as a register of changing conceptions as to who qualify, and why, for full membership of the human community; and thus also to some extent as a register of Western civilization’s anxieties and divisions about its own qualities, activities and achievements” (Soper, 1995, p.74).

“Natural living” becomes hence a highly appreciated goal for affluent societies, and has a consistent market value and promotion. „Green cities“, green tourism, eco-development are the key words. The aim is to obtain a better quality of living from the blend of nature and technology.

"I don't think we should kid ourselves. We haven't re-created the past here. The past is gone. It can never be re-created. What we've done is reconstruct the past - or at least a version of the past. And I'm saying we can make a better version."(Crichton, 1990, p.123)1.

- we read in Michel Crichton’s best-seller *Jurassic Park*.

The cultural challenge of the oxymoronic “artificial-nature” was accepted already in the early Seventy’s by Martin Krieger’s provoking article *What 's Wrong with Plastic Trees?*

"It is likely - writes Krieger - that we shall want to apply our technology to the creation of artificial environments. .... Finally, we may want to create proxy environments by means of substitution and simulation. .... What's wrong with plastic trees? My guess is that there is very little wrong with them. Much more can be done with plastic trees and the like to give most people the feeling that they are experiencing nature (Krieger, 1973, p.433)

To end up:

"We are perhaps justifiably, afraid of what the prime objects of the future will be. We prefer natural environments to synthesized ones because we are familiar with techniques of managing the natural ones and know what the effects of such management are. Plastic trees are frightening" (Krieger, 1973, p.450).

There is no necessary contradiction between acknowledging the fact that 'nature' has been universally affected (and to a very large extent created) by humans or that our notion of nature is historically specific and culturally mediated. On the contrary, it is

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probably precisely because of this mediation (which can vary greatly from place to place and culture to culture) that we can, so genuinely, individually and collectively, love, value and feel spiritually moved by 'nature'. More, that appreciation and what is appreciated may itself take different forms - arguably it is the more rounded individual who can enjoy and be moved by both the urban park and the remote 'wilderness' than the individual for whom only the one or the other has any meaning.

Adams points out the unique quality of "otherness" of nature, impossible to reproduce, either with the more advanced techniques. He writes:

"Nature is of enormous value, because of its role as a cultural archive, a record of human endeavour and husbandry, and because nature has a wild non human otherness that stands apart from human values" (Adams, 1997, p. 106).

And concludes:

" We have to rebuild contact with nature, and re-establish a place for nature in popular culture. We can do it gradually, by accretion and by attraction. It is no good arguing that the flea-ridden wild hedgehog in the garden is better than its virtual- reality cousin in the megadrive, but we *can* argue that it is different, and important: alive, and quite different from ourselves" (Adams, 1997, p. 113).

Our feelings towards the "otherness" of nature, are related with the longing for a "re-enchantment" with the world, in Harvey's words; the sensation of nostalgia and emotion in front of untouched wilderness, like sunsets, waterfalls, or the ocean, opens wide unanswerable questions. It could just be the nostalgic memory of an ancient past, when humans lived closer to nature, in community with non-humans beings.

Or we can remember, on the other hand, the image of the Earth sustained by two hands and the famous declaration of Elisée Reclus - "*L'homme est la nature prenant conscience d'elle-meme*" (Reclus, 1982, p.106).

The exact words of Reclus - "humanity is nature becoming conscious of itself" - are reported in the conclusion of *The idea of Wilderness* of Oelschlaeger, one of the paladins of deep ecology.

Whether we accept those deep implications or not, in the margin of scientific discourse, anyhow, remains a sensation of lost and a feeling of belonging, connected with the esthetics of nature. I will finish with a last quote which displays this uneasiness with abstract nature interpretations, also in the words of a so-called "pure scientist", not chargeable with romanticism, namely Arthur G. Tansley, the ecologist who coined the term „ecosystem“<sup>2</sup>:

"When I'm commenting the merits of a proposed nature reserve, after describing the scientific merits of its flora and fauna, I often find it hard to resist bringing in the scenic beauty of the landscape or the attractiveness of the vegetation, though my allusion to those takes on an almost pathetic tone. It is as if I were trying to say 'and of course, the place is really beautiful as well, though perhaps I ought not to mention the fact' (Tansley, in Adams, 1997, p.93).

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<sup>2</sup>A.G. Tansley, "The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts and Terms", *Ecology*, 16, n.3, 1935, pp.284-307.

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