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Peer reviewed

Review: The Human Relationship With Nature

By P.H. Kahn, Jr.

Reviewed by [Randolph Haluza-DeLay](#)
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Peter H. Kahn, Jr. *The Human Relationship With Nature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001. 281 pp. ISBN 0-262-11240-X (cloth); 0-262-61170-8 (paper). US\$40.00 cloth; US\$22.95 paper.

The Human Relationship With Nature is a lively and scholarly read based on Kahn's studies on moral reasoning about nature and the environment. The book addresses developmental psychology and morality, and environmental awareness. It presents five studies conducted in three countries, with implications for understanding how people affiliate with the natural world and develop an ecological morality.

The five studies are of children and adults and were conducted in the United States, Brazil, and Portugal. The studies utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews to investigate respondents' reports of their experiences of nature, parks, animals, and plants. The studies also investigate respondents' justification for decisions around environmental ethical dilemmas. Although all the studies have been previously published, the book form will encourage additional exposure to readers unlikely to delve into those particular journals. Kahn also presents greater detail than allowed by a journal article, and integrates each study into the overall context of a research program. The book form allows the studies to be compared and creates an extended discussion of cumulative implications.

Kahn places the human relationship with nature in a Piagetian and Kohlbergian framework. Kahn's contribution is to show how ecological morality can have both obligatory (categorical) and discretionary (contextual) facets. In addition, the studies of inner city residents' experiences of nature demonstrate how social factors, such as poverty, violence, and urban planning, inhibit experience of the earth. Across all three cultures, the studies give measured support for the hypothesis that humans exhibit biophilia, a desire for affiliation with nature that has a developmental or evolutionary basis.

In addition, Kahn describes his research methods in detail. Appendices include the complete set of interview questions and the entire coding manual for analysis of the interviews. The detail will help both novice and experienced researchers develop methodological flexibility. It also highlights the rigor of qualitative data analysis. Some concerns do remain over the

universalizing of concepts across cultures. However, Kahn makes only modest claims about his conclusions. Clearly, considerable research using a variety of methods will be needed to develop a better understanding of this topic.

The lively writing style makes *The Human Relationship With Nature* appropriate for most levels of undergraduate and postgraduate readers. The scholarship makes the book valuable for any reader interested in human development or environmental studies. Kahn's apparent commitment to the people interviewed make it a valuable example of well done research on a difficult topic. The American Educational Research Association gave *The Human Relationship With Nature* an Outstanding Book Award in 2000. The highest praise for a book is that nearly all readers will find some new learning.

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