

Addressing the Disparity Between Popular Narratives About Human-Nature Relationships and the Findings of Environmental Justice Scholars

If there is one thing about humanity that can be agreed upon, it is that we are a people separated by geography but united by our stories. Stories drive us—stories about who we are and what we can become. They are not merely an aspect of our identity. They *are* our identity. These stories can empower and connect us, or they can erode and w our faith in ourselves, in the most essential elements of our nature. At this moment, the stories we hear on the news and the notifications we receive objectively paint a bleak picture of humanity’s relationship with the natural world.

At the beginning of the popular Netflix series *Altered Carbon*, Takeshi Kovacs’s internal monologue addresses the viewer with a powerful message: “Peace is a struggle against our very nature. A skin we stretch over the bone, muscle, and sinew of our own innate savagery.” This quote is clear and brutally potent in its message, and while these words were spoken by a fictional character, they still serve to summarize a very real belief we tend to harbor about ourselves—that humans are by nature selfish, destructive, and malevolent beings. Many of us have at some point internalized this idea about humanity’s place in the world, and cannot help but feel the sting of it being reinforced when we turn on the news each day.

In this research paper, I attempt to address the contrast between the beliefs popularized by the media outlets we interact with, and the findings of those engaged in Environmental Justice scholarship. The scope of this review is limited to published works relevant to the EJ discourse.

There are many examples of human interactions with our natural environment having a net-positive impact on ecosystem resilience and biodiversity. For example, a landmark study conducted in March of 2017, authored by over 144 environmental researchers and published in *Science*—produced compelling evidence that human activity was in large part responsible for determining the structure of many modern tree communities in the Amazon basin, and subsequently brought with it an important interchange of domesticated species between different regions of the rainforest. The end product of this complex and millennia-long interaction was an apparent increase in the overall biodiversity of the ecosystems with which pre-Columbian human populations interacted (2017, March 3rd, *Science*, p. 925-931, Levis et. al.). As Levis et. al state in their conclusion, “Detecting the widespread effect of ancient societies in modern forests not only strengthens efforts to conserve domesticated and useful wild-plant populations, which is of critical importance for modern food security, but also strongly refutes ideas of Amazonian forests being untouched by man.”

This point articulates a history of many different pre-Columbian populations manipulating their environment in a way that benefits human settlement, while simultaneously increasing ecosystem resilience, creating new habitats for other species, and altering the chemistry of the soils on which we reside.

Though the report does not go into exhaustive detail on the topic, chapter four of Paul Hawken’s *Regeneration* describes in detail how these anthropogenic soils become infused over hundreds of years with large quantities of *terra preta*—what we now refer to as biochar. It is theorized that biochar, a highly stable and carbon-rich compound whose impacts can last for millennia, played a crucial role in sustaining between eight and ten million people in the Amazon

basin. During this time, their findings would seem to suggest that ecosystem health, broadly speaking, did not experience any major decline during this period.

The findings of the study conducted by Levis et al. would seem to connect with those of anthropologist Eugene Parker in his 1992 article in *American Anthropologist*. In the article, he explores the concept of the *apête*, “forest islands” that form the bedrock of the Gorotire Kayapo’s ecological framework. The Kayapo are a group of Indigenous communities located in the eastern Amazon basin, who employ *apêtes* as a means of creating fertile soil in which to plant a wide variety of semi-domesticated species (Parker, E., 1992, *American Anthropologist*, p. 409).

According to Parker, the Gorotire Kayapo use traditional processes to create mulch from detritus found around a given area; they then pile the mulch in a mound in a slightly depressed open clearing (this helps with water retention), and allow the mulch to leech needed nutrients into the ground. Relying heavily on this technique, they are able to create fertile ground from what was previously nutrient-poor, notably acidic soil. This method paves the way for planting a wide range of semi-domesticated, sun-tolerant crops that benefit their communities by benefiting the soil.

According to Lyla June Johnston, a scholar and community organizer of the Diné (Navajo) Nation, like the Kayapo, members of the Haítzaqv (Heiltsuk) Nation in Bella Bella, Canada have created a unique ecological niche for human beings in the local food chain: the ecosystem engineer. Routinely stewarding vast kelp gardens that provide refuge for wild herring, the presence of those involved has allowed an entire web of life to flourish. According to Johnston, it can be argued that without humans present, this entire ecosystem would likely collapse. It goes without saying, however, that although these and many more beneficial human-

nature interactions certainly exist, they are by no means representative of *all* relationships between human populations and the natural world.

In Gary P. Nabhan's *Cultural Parallax*, he describes the misguided efforts of past environmental scholars—including the famed John Muir—to establish what was often referred to as the “American-Indian view of nature”—a fictitious notion that all Indigenous communities share a monolithic viewpoint of the natural world. Muir, according to Nabhan, erroneously believed that lands stewarded by Indigenous communities were “pristine” because said communities simply adopted a uniformly non-impactful way of life. In reality, he could not be further from the truth. For instance, vast swaths of territory within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park—widely regarded as some of the most beautiful, undisturbed wilderness in the nation—is now known to have been substantially altered by human settlement for hundreds of years prior to colonialist exploitation (Nabhan, G. P., 1995, *Cultural Parallax*, p. 93). What Nabhan's work teaches us is that the relationships that exist between humans and the environment we come from tell many stories and wear many faces—making it understandably difficult to ontologically answer the question of whether humans are by nature a steward or the destroyer of the natural world.

Just as the diversity of human-environment relationships complicates the task of establishing a meaningful answer to the question of whether we are naturally destructive creatures, in her essay, *Wakanda Doesn't Have Suburbs*, Kendra Pierre-Louis tells us a story of the miseducation she received surrounding humanity's place in the world—from her classroom from her peers, and even her own religion. This narrative created a sense of inevitability around environmental destruction in the face of what many have come to call “progress.” She writes that her

experiences growing up separated from nature in New York City reinforced the anxiety and self-loathing she already felt about herself and her species, what is now referred to as “species shame.” According to Pierre-Louis, young people in particular are bombarded by U.S culture’s highly cynical (and ahistorical) view on the relationship between humans and nature (Pierre-Louis, K., *All We Can Save*, p. 139). This attitude, though unique in its impact on each individual, can be uniformly damaging to the collective will of those growing up in this time of climate crisis to act. Further into Piere-Louis’s essay, she problematizes popular films and shows like *The 100*, *Terra Nova*, and James Cameron’s *Avatar* as examples of the widespread cynicism coming to dominate the worldwide climate discourse.

In conclusion, regarding the relationship between human beings and our natural world, my research has led me to the opinion that popular media and political narratives portraying humanity as an innately uncivilized, unrepentant destroyer of the global ecosystem are deceitful in nature. They only consider the modern mentality of exploitation brought about by colonialism, and thus fail to account for the complex socio-ecological dynamics that our species has long shared with this planet.

Bibliography

(Critical Introductions to Geography) Paul Robbins-Political Ecology A Critical Introduction, 2nd Edition-Wiley-Blackwell (2011) (n.d.).

Goymann, W. (2020). What the Corona (SARS-CoV 2) pandemic, climate change, and the biodiversity crisis teach us about human nature. *Ethology*, 126(6), 593–594.

Hawken, Paul. (n.d.). *Regeneration—Ending the Climate Crisis in One Generation*.

Kendra Pierre-Louis. (n.d.). Wakanda Doesn't Have Suburbs. *All We Can Save—Truth, Courage and Solutions for the Climate Crisis*. p. 138-144

Nabhan, G.P.—*Cultural Parallax* (1995).pdf. (n.d.).

Parker, E. (1992). Forest Islands and Kayapo Resource Management in Amazonia: A Reappraisal of the Apete. *American Anthropologist*, 94(2), 406–428.

Levis et al, (2017). Persistent effects of pre-Columbian plant domestication on Amazonian forest composition. *Science*, Vol. 355, Issue 6328, pp. 925-931.