

Humans and Nature: Can the Gulf Be Bridged?

By LAUREN E. OAKES

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Basil, tomatoes, and glass floats from the outer coast at a home in Gustavus, Alaska.

Basking in a surprise dose of early morning sun, we sat together on a bench made from yellow-cedar at the [Gustavus Forelands Preserve](#), a landscape of spruce and cottonwood forests and beaches overlooking the Icy Strait waters. We were staring at a diagram on a piece of paper I had handed to Hank Lentfer, a lifelong Alaskan and longtime resident of the tiny town of Gustavus.

The image before us was a series of circles in pairs, overlapping at varying degrees from just barely touching to completely merged. In each set, one circle was labeled "Nature" and the other "Self."

After an hour or so of questions about [the dying yellow-cedar forests I am studying](#), I asked Hank to tell me how he viewed his relationship with nature. Researchers studying the links between environmental knowledge, attitudes and behaviors have found that individuals' level of concern about the environment depends on the extent to which they perceive a connection between themselves and other people, or themselves and nature.

"How connected are you?" I asked. He took a deep breath and without hesitation, pointed to the far end, where the two circles overlap as one.

"This diagram is asking what I feel," he said. "What I believe is true is, it's impossible to be anything but this. All these other options are what we create in our minds. This is the metaphysical, spiritual, and material reality."

Hank argues that our perception of nature as separate has spawned a lot of the environmental problems we see today. When we hike in a national park or protected area and experience nature as something removed from our daily routine, we come to know it as something apart from us.

"Everywhere we look, we see the ugly things humans are doing," he said. "The biggest barrier to pointing to the merged circles is our relationship with grief today."

To be able to grieve for the loss of something, we have to first develop love and affection. It takes time. It takes a deep connection, cultivated emotions that emerge from knowing and experiencing a place or a person



again and again. In his recent book, [“Faith of Cranes.”](#) Hank shares his thoughts on this matter, inspired by his lifetime of loving southeast Alaska and watching it change.

Hank paused and returned to the trees I have come to know well. “Lauren, if you’re totally connected, you’re going to have to deal with your emotions to those dying yellow cedars.” Emotion is not a part of science, but I would be ignoring the truth in my own human experience, if I didn’t acknowledge that I feel, I physically feel, something different measuring a forest of dead trees than I do measuring a forest of live ones.

As I sort through the data on thousands of trees we’ve visited along the outer coast, this next chapter — understanding the social response to the decline of yellow cedars — will carry me into deep conversation in years to come. While I’ve been immersed in remote coastal forests for my research on ecosystems’ responses to yellow cedar decline over the last two summers, there’s a social, human element in all this that is equally important to me as an interdisciplinary scientist.

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Cottonwood, spruce and an aging fishing boat by the Salmon River in Gustavus.



My program at Stanford is teaching me to think beyond disciplines. Recently emergent fields in land change science and social ecology draw on tools from the social and natural sciences to improve our understanding of complex interactions between humans and the environment. It’s a collective effort, breaking down institutional and academic boundaries to help solve the kinds of environmental issues we’re facing today.

Before returning to California with my tree cores and data sheets, I have been spending my days in conversation, starting to ask questions for more interviews I’ll conduct when Alaska calls me back.

I’ve asked Hank about his experience in the coastal forests here. I’ve asked him about the ways he has used these forests over the course of this life. We’ve talked about values. We’ve talked about climate change. We’ve talked about living and dying trees.

I’ve asked him to tell me what it feels like to walk in the forests near his home. We’ve talked about sense of place. We’ve talked about love of place. We’ve looked at maps together. But this diagram at the end turned the tables, and Hank posed hard questions to me.

“If you went back to school and asked a whole room full of people in your program, ‘Who here is studying a species or community that’s in good health?’ How many people would raise their hands?” he wondered. “My guess is zero, Lauren. So how do you help that room of researchers cope with that? And what is our individual and collective response to this growing piece of increasingly grim news?”

Hank reached for my pen. In the blank space beneath the diagram of circles — what environmental psychologists call the Inclusion of Nature in Self scale, or I.N.S., he drew a blue line across the page.

He put a 1 at one end of the line and a 10 at the other and wrote the words “To hell in a handbasket” and “It’s all going to work out” on the two opposing sides.

“So here’s the basic question for this one,” he said of the diagram. “Is total ecological unraveling inevitable or not? Ask that one of your colleagues and your professors. My guess is they are all pretty low on that scale. Maybe they’re not at the 1 but somewhere closer to ‘hell in handbasket’ than ‘it’s all going to work out just fine.’” I probed a bit on his definition of unraveling, recalling periods in history when the lands with forests not far from where we sit together were once covered by glaciers. The ecology itself changed. People responded. Native communities adapted to new conditions.

We debated a bit and came up with a modification: “What’s the likelihood of making conditions on earth really uncondusive to mammals, especially bipeds?”

Without labeling it, Hank was talking about the Anthropocene, or age of Man. Just over a decade ago, the Nobel Prize-winning scientist Paul Crutzen suggested that we are living in the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch in which humans are drastically altering the planet. It's the idea that humans have become the primary force for change on the earth. A glacier might have acted as the dominant force for change thousands of years ago, but now it's our actions as a society – from the local to global scale — and our patterns of land use change that take the lead.

Hank wanted to know what happens when someone identifies with the totally merged circles on the I.N.S. scale and then the low end of the scale he's drawn. But it didn't stop here. He drew another blue line on the page, added the 1 and 10 as before, and this time wrote "Nothing can be done" and "No end to the good work" on the two opposing sides.

"So this one is the scale of hope," he told me. "It's about action. It's about seeing beauty. How do we get people who are high on the connectedness and low on the 'hell in the hand basket' to get to 10, 'there's no end to the good work we can do'?"

It was all getting pretty philosophical by this point, and maybe we were talking more about semantics. But there was something in his questions that struck to the core of own motivations. I chose to study dying forests linked to climate change. The research questions themselves require me to embed deep in the forests themselves and then in the homes of people who have known them. I chose a project that requires me to cultivate connection to place and people.

Hank knew we were talking about scales and circles and metrics of connectivity because the yellow cedar trees brought us both to that bench. "Grief, over the loss of cedars is powerful emotion and unfortunately, it's a rare emotion," he said.

"There are so few humans on the planet who have cultivated the affection for these trees. To be in love with the cedar is to be in love with something so far out of the normal day-to-day concerns. It is a meditation onto itself. And then to grieve for the loss of a cedar is another piece of the meditation. And then to act from that meditation, is yet another piece."

In a week's time, I'll soon find myself navigating six-lane highways, filtering background noise from the flood of people chattering and walking concrete paths between eucalyptus groves and brick buildings. It is a strange clash of two seemingly separate worlds. Yet somehow, I know that seeing Alaska and California as connected will allow me to make sense of all these numbers and stories.

Hank Lentfer, a resident of Gustavus who broaches the notion of a "hope scale."



