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Are Humans Natural? Part 3: Nature Relatedness and the American Dream

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Title:

Nature Relatedness and the American Dream

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Overview:

This learning module is part of a series of activities designed to encourage students to develop relational values with nature. In this activity, students reflect on their relationship with nature and consider the impact of their plans/goals for the future on the environment and the larger goal of sustainability. Students evaluate their relationship with nature through the Nature Relatedness (NR-6) Test (Nisbet and Zelenski, 2013), compare their NR-6 score to others, consider how their goals (“dreams”) are related to the American Dream, and speculate on the attainability of sustainability given our individually driven goals for the future. This activity challenges students to consider whether their individual dreams for the future are compatible with a sustainable interaction between humans and nature.

Goals:

Relational values for nature are promoted when students:

- Think about their relationship with nature
- Consider the impact of their dreams for the future on nature
- Reflect on whether their dreams for the future are compatible with sustainability goals
- Understand that everyone, including the instructor, has relational values for nature

Learning goals are reinforced when students:

- Have a greater understanding of their own relationship with nature
- Evaluate their relationship with nature relative to other people
- Make connections between the subject matter and their lives
- Consider nature and sustainability goals when making decisions
- Discuss the American Dream and its impact on individual goals

User Guide:

This activity is suitable for use in any post-secondary college course, but is likely to be most useful in a course that is in some way directly related to the environment. The handouts provided in this document are intended to stimulate reflection and instructor-led in-class discussion. Portions of these worksheets could be assigned as homework in support of in-class discussion. The materials below could also be adapted to an essay format. The instructor should not hesitate to share their relational values with nature and/or dreams for the future with the class, but should be careful not to try to impose those views on students.

Materials:

- Discussion for instructors (immediately below)
- Part I: Nature Relatedness Scale (NR-6) handout: used for questions in Part IV
- Part II: Foundations of the American Dream: used for questions in Part II
- Part III: Post 1931 American Dream Quotes: Used for questions in Part III
- Part IV: Nature-relatedness and the American Dream: Used to synthesize ideas from the previous sections and prepare students for in-class discussion

Part I:

This section evaluates students' relatedness to nature with the NR-6 (Nature Relatedness scale). Students will respond to six statements on a scale of 1-5 (1 being disagreeing strongly, 5 being agreeing strongly), then average their answers to calculate their NR-6 score. This quiz should be given to students first with minimal explanation about the activity in order to accurately capture their nature-relatedness score. There is no in-class discussion for Part I.

Part II:

This section is designed to force students to articulate what the American Dream is to them and then reflect on what dreams other people might have.

Q1: Students should be encouraged to think out their answer and not just reflexively write the first thing that comes to mind. The instructor should consider circulating around the room looking for disengaged students (with very short answers) and ask them to elaborate on their ideas.

Q2: This question could be elaborated upon depending on the context of the course and preparation of the students.

Discussion:

Target Q2 for discussion. Students who are in the minority in your classroom should be encouraged to share their views with other students so that the class gets a broad perspective on the questions. Students who are immigrants to the United States should particularly be encouraged to speak up during this part of the activity in order to generate global perspective. Dreams for the future may differ wildly between students from different backgrounds and can result in fascinating, insightful, and potentially lengthy discussions.

Part III:

The quotes could be displayed on a screen at the front of the class or shared directly (printed or digitally) with students. Part II asks students to consider what the American Dream is for generally and for other people whereas Part III asks students to reflect on their personally held dreams and goals for the future in the context of the American Dream.

Q3: Answers to this question will be varied. Some students will not read all of the quotes. Be sure to allow time for students to fully read/consider the quotes. Students who finish quickly should be encouraged to expand their thoughts on this question or pick a second quote and reflect on that one.

Q4: The easy answer is “No”. Encourage students to explain why they do not believe the American Dream is attainable for everyone.

Q5: Encourage students to fully articulate their plans/goals/dreams for the future. Where do they see themselves in 5, 10, 20, 50 years? What do they want from life?

Discussion Points for Part III:

- Is there one quote that the class liked more than others?
- Is the American Dream attainable?
- Would someone be willing to share their American Dream?
- Does everyone in the class have the same American Dream?
- What do the class’s answers to Q5 have in common? How are they different?

Part IV:

This section stimulates reflection on the implications of the NR-6 score of the students, and how nature relatedness fits in with their dreams for the future. The graph in this section is from Hughs et al. (2019) and displays the average NR-6 values for females (red) and males (blue). The solid lines are the mean NR-6 scores for males and females, and the dotted lines are 95% confidence intervals for each gender.

Q6: Students should consider why they had the NR-6 score that they did, and whether they are satisfied with this score or not. NR-6 scores may vary between students, as will their reaction to their NR-6 score. This module has been tested with post-secondary biological sciences students, who tend to have higher NR-6 scores than the general population.

Q7: There are many possible reasons why NR-6 scores vary from person to person. Common answers are upbringing, age, sex, and place of residence. The instructor should ensure that students reflect on why NR-6 scores vary throughout people’s lives, including the major increase from late-teens to early twenties.

Q8: This question is the cap-stone to the learning module and is likely to stimulate a good deal of reflection and consideration. Answers to this question are varied and personal, so should be treated with respect.

Discussion Points for Part IV:

- What effect does pursuing the American Dream have on the environment?
- Can the American Dream be achieved while still living a sustainable lifestyle?
- In what ways are your dreams compatible with sustainability? How are they not compatible?

- Would you change your dreams for the future to match the goal of sustainability?
- What influences your relationship with nature? Do you want to change this relationship? How?
- What does it mean to have a high NR-6 score? What does a low NR-6 score mean?
- What can you do to change your NR-6 score? Do you want to change your NR-6 score?
- How does age play a role in your relationship with nature?
- What do you consider when reflecting upon your dreams for the future?
- Does society consider sustainability when looking into the future?
- Do you think NR-6 score plays a role in an individual's idea of the American Dream? Does it play a role in your dreams for the future?

Sample Implementation:

The activity is designed to be implemented in a variety of class settings. We recommend that instructors use all sections of this activity as outlined in this document, but the activity could be altered to utilize a hybrid homework and in-class format. For instance, parts II and III may be assigned as homework, allowing Part I, Part IV, and the discussion to be completed in a shorter class period.

Literature Cited

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Hughes J, Rogerson M, Barton J, and Bragg R. 2019. Age and connection to nature: when is engagement critical?. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 17:5, 265-269.

Name(s): _____

Nature Relatedness Scale (NR-6)

Part I:

Instructions: For each of the following, please rate the extent to which you agree with each statement, using a scale from 1 to 5 as shown below. Please respond as you really feel, rather than how you think “most people” feel.

1 Disagree strongly	2 Disagree a little	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Agree a little	5 Agree strongly
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1) My ideal vacation spot would be a remote, wilderness area. _____

2) I always think about how my actions affect the environment. _____

3) My connection to nature and the environment is a part of my spirituality. _____

4) I take notice of wildlife wherever I am. _____

5) My relationship with nature is an important part of who I am. _____

6) I feel very connected to all living things and the earth. _____

Scoring: Items are averaged to create a score on the brief measure of NR.

NR-6 score: _____

Part II:

Read the quotes below and then answer the following questions. We will discuss your answers to these questions in class.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. - **Declaration of Independence, 1776**¹

That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. - **James Truslow, the first person to articulate “the American Dream”, writing in 1931**²

Now, I say to you today, my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: / we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. - **Martin Luther King Jr., drawing a direct connection between the previous two quotes, 1962**³

1) In your own words, what is the “American Dream”?

2) Do people in other parts of the world have an American Dream? Why or why not?

Part III:

Read the “post-1931 American Dreams Quotes” then answer the questions below.

Post 1931 American Dream Quotes:

Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires. - **Ronald Wright**⁴

If wealth was the inevitable result of hard work and enterprise, every woman in Africa would be a millionaire. - **George Monbiot**⁵

And when I speak, I don't speak as a Democrat. Or a Republican. Nor an American. I speak as a victim of America's so-called democracy. You and I have never seen democracy - all we've seen is hypocrisy. When we open our eyes today and look around America, we see America not through the eyes of someone who has enjoyed the fruits of Americanism. We see America through the eyes of someone who has been the victim of Americanism. We don't see any American dream. We've experienced only the American nightmare. - **Malcolm X**⁶

America is not so much a nightmare as a non-dream. The American non-dream is precisely a move to wipe the dream out of existence. The dream is a spontaneous happening and therefore dangerous to a control system set up by the non-dreamers. - **William S. Burroughs**⁷

Honest, industrious, peaceful citizens were classed as bloodsuckers, if they asked to be paid a living wage. And they saw that praise was reserved henceforth for those who devised means of getting paid enormously for committing crimes against which no laws had been passed. Thus the American dream turned belly up, turned green, bobbed to the scummy surface of cupidity unlimited, filled with gas, went bang in the noonday sun. - **Kurt Vonnegut**⁸

I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty. - **John F. Kennedy**⁹

Looking for treasure isn't just part of being an American, it is America. - **Brad Meltzer**¹⁰

All you need for happiness is a good gun, a good horse, and a good wife. - **Daniel Boone**¹¹

Only in America can someone start with nothing and achieve the American Dream. That's the greatness of this country. - **Rafael Cruz**¹²

To me, the American Dream is being able to follow your own personal calling. To be able to do what you want to do is incredible freedom. - **Maya Lin**¹³

Americans believe that they still live in the land of opportunity - the country that offers the greatest chance of economic advancement. But this is no longer the case. - **Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee**¹⁴

The American dream is, in part, responsible for a great deal of crime and violence because people feel that the country owes them not only a living but a good living. - **David Abrahansen**¹⁵

America is not just a country; it's an idea. - **Bono**¹⁶

I look forward confidently to the day when all who work for a living will be one with no thought to their separateness as Negroes, Jews, Italians or any other distinctions. This will be the day when we bring into full realization the American dream - a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men will not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character; a dream of a nation where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone, but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of the human personality. - **Martin Luther King Jr.**¹⁷

If the American dream is for Americans only, it will remain our dream and never be our destiny. - **Rene de Visme Williamson**¹⁸

Success is somebody else's failure. Success is the American Dream we can keep dreaming because most people in most places, including thirty million of ourselves, live wide awake in the terrible reality of poverty. - **Ursula K. LeGuin**¹⁹

For other nations, Utopia is a blessed past never to be recovered; for Americans it is just beyond the horizon. - **Henry Kissinger**²⁰

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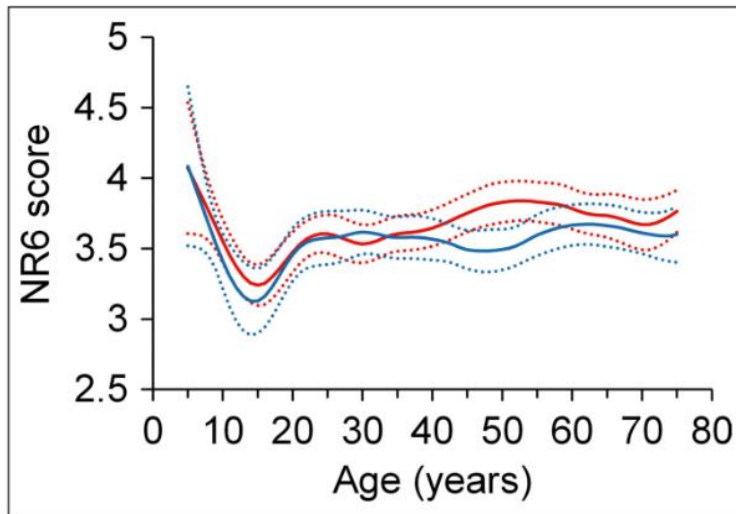
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3) Which quote do you most identify with and why?

4) Is the American Dream attainable for everyone? Why or why not.

5) What is your (personal) American Dream? Is your answer here different than your answer in question #2 above? Why or why not?

Part IV:



Predicted NR-6 scores for ages 5–75 years for females (red) and males (blue). Dark lines represent predicted means with 95% confidence intervals (dotted lines). From Hughes et. al. (2019).

6) Plot yourself on the graph above and compare your NR-6 score to the average score of your age group. How do you feel about the difference in score, if any? Are you surprised? Why or why not?

7) Why do NR-6 scores vary from person to person?

8) How is your NR-6 score related to your dreams for the future (Question #5 above)?