

# Science for Environment Policy

## Why protect nature? Relational values: the missing link in policies for the natural environment

**The concepts of instrumental value (protecting nature for humans' sake) and intrinsic value (protecting nature for nature's sake) are fundamental to environmental policy.** This paper — based on a literature review and critical analysis — argues that using these concepts alone overlooks important concerns for the environment. The authors recommend also considering relational values, which derive from the relationships between people and nature.

The debate about why we protect nature is at the fundament of environmental policy. There are currently two major ways of framing this debate: *intrinsic values*, which reflect nature's inherent value, independent of people, and *instrumental values*, which relate to the value of nature for people (nature provides commodities — such as food, [water](#) and precious metals — and valuable ecosystem services — such as regulating climate). Instrumental values can become blurred with commercial values, which can make nature into a commodity, and have thus been criticised by some.

Nature's value can be expressed and realised in other ways and this paper — an opinion piece based on a review of the academic literature on environmental values — argues that focusing only on instrumental and intrinsic values fails to resonate with views on human wellbeing or what people believe to be the 'right way' to act towards the environment, and may not lead to the most fair or desirable environmental policy outcomes. The authors say that, although intrinsic and instrumental values are important to conservation, thinking only in these terms misses a "fundamental basis of concern" for nature.

These two values are often presented as alternatives, while in fact they can co-exist, and many environmental concerns could be better understood as connected to both, via a third group of values called relational values. Relational values, prominent in a range of philosophies, can be defined as the "preferences, principles, and virtues associated with relationships, both interpersonal and as articulated by policies and social norms".

Relational values pertain to the relationships between people and nature and can be collective or individual:

- *Collective relational values* include cultural identity (place is important to who we are as a group), social cohesion (being in nature allows people to connect to each other) and social responsibility (caring for nature is important for the welfare of others).
- *Individual relational values* include individual identity (a place can be important to a person's identity, such as a [farmer's](#) identity being tightly linked to the [land](#)) and stewardship (respecting and preserving nature as 'the right thing to do' or to help somebody live a good life).

Relational values can also include relationships between people but that involve nature, such as some cultural practices.

The researchers provide some real-world examples of relational values, such as an ancient olive tree that is no longer harvested but still has symbolic significance for local people, and the annual migration of sheep herds in the Iberian Peninsula, which goes beyond management for human benefit to reinforcing cultural identity.

*Continued on next page.*



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*(continued)*

Considering the relationships people have with nature could reduce the negative impacts of human lifestyles on the environment. Relational approaches can also motivate conservation without putting a price on nature, and may help to incorporate cultural ecosystem services into environmental assessments and [policies](#).

Thus, relational values could reveal new and possibly more productive approaches to policy. The researchers give the example of payments for ecosystem services (PES) schemes, many of which are limited to specific actions which commodify nature (e.g. providing an amount of money per tree that is grown, or per hectare of land that is protected). Using relational values, these schemes could be re-designed to nurture the existing relationships landowners have with the environment and encourage them to design their own stewardship actions, such as through grants from NGOs that enable landowners to manage their land in a way that reduces environmental impact. The researchers suggest such an approach would be more equitable than the existing market-based approach to PES and could facilitate more effective conservation.

Environmental initiatives based on relational values could leverage social relationships to channel respect for nature, through activities such as hiking, gardening or bird watching, for example. They could also promote sustainability by encouraging more responsible relationships with products. This could involve community repair and re-use workshops, challenging the idea that things are disposable and confronting the environmental impacts associated with [resource](#) extraction and manufacturing.

Some organisations are already recognising the potential of the concept. The [Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#) is underpinned by a conceptual framework based on the interactions between nature and people, and which explicitly recognises relational values. There is also work being carried out across Europe: the EU-funded projects [BIOMOT](#) and [BESAFE](#) aim to improve our expression of alternative values for nature and biodiversity, while the projects [OPERAS](#) and [OpenNESS](#) aim to insert ecosystem sciences and natural capital concepts into real-world decision-making.

Wider use of this approach by policymakers, NGOs, researchers and the private sector could ensure that environmental decisions account for peoples' relationships with nature and better conserve the environment. This in turn is important for ensuring that present and future generations can lead fulfilling lives — a key principle of relational values.



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