



# Ecological & Environmental Identity: Strategies for Building Community and Mitigating Conflict

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**Guest Article: By:** Michelle Doerr, Anavah Consulting, LLC.

Michelle Doerr, President and Founder of Anavah Consulting, LLC is a consultant, coach and facilitator making the workplace and relationships more authentic and reconnecting people with planet. In addition to her training, experience and expertise in executive leadership, facilitation, conflict resolution, and organizational development, Michelle is also a trained Wildlife Biologist and her experience in the natural resource profession and outdoor recreation aids in her understanding of the workplace needs of those that work with and for nature.

What you think and feel about the environment is important to how you act. And each person's beliefs and values play into categories of "us" and "them." This can create community around shared beliefs and values, but differences, real or imagined, also create conflict. To get more community and less conflict, I believe in spectrums and that people are able to come together when we spend time better understanding each other. Enter Ecological and Environmental Identity. This article provides three specific strategies in the form of individual or group exercises to build personal and shared understanding.

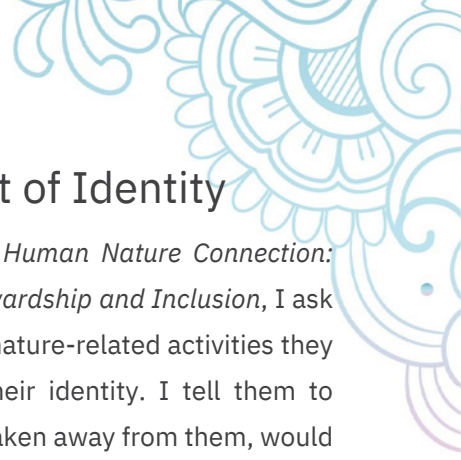
## Environmental Identity importance

In the book *Ecological Identity: Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist*, author Mitchell Thomashow defines ecological identity as "all the different ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth as manifested personality, values, actions and sense of self." He goes further to say, "each person's path to ecological identity reflects his or her cognitive, intuitive, and affective perceptions of ecological relationships."

### DEFINITIONS

**Ecological Identity:** "all the different ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth as manifested personality, values, actions and sense of self (...) each person's path to ecological identity reflects his or her cognitive, intuitive, and affective perceptions of ecological relationships."

**Environmental Identity:** "a sense of connection to some part of the non-human natural environment (...) that affects the way in which we perceive and act toward the world; a belief that the environment is important to us and an important part of who we are"



Environmental researcher Susan Clayton defines Environmental Identity as “a sense of connection to some part of the non-human natural environment (...) that affects the way in which we perceive and act toward the world; a belief that the environment is important to us and an important part of who we are” (Clayton 2003).

Anyone doing work in conservation and the environment can benefit from having a firm idea of their own environmental identity as well as an understanding of other team members and stakeholders’ identities. Understanding environmental identity “is important because it drives one’s commitment to environmentalism” (Thomashow 1995). And don’t we all want to know what motivates our work on environmental and conservation issues?

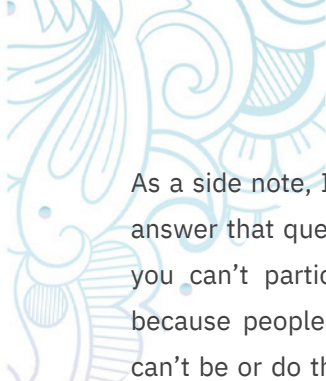
We can use information on ecological and environmental identity to help find commonalities and pressure points. It might help us be more curious about each other, so we aren’t pitting ourselves against something or someone with whom we’ve only made assumptions. Plus, it can be just a fun way to engage each other and to learn that we all exist on spectrums rather than binaries. In the end, I believe if we are all just fighting for our beliefs about nature to be the ones that are right, rather than collaborating on solutions - that doesn’t help us or the planet.

## Outdoors as part of Identity

In my workshop entitled *Human Nature Connection: Building Ecowellness, Stewardship and Inclusion*, I ask participants to name 1-2 nature-related activities they would incorporate into their identity. I tell them to consider the activities, if taken away from them, would deeply affect who they are. The answers are always varied. As might be expected, when working primarily with fish and wildlife agencies, hunting and angling come up frequently on the list. Not far from those, photographer, hiker, wildlife watcher, explorer, camper, and gardener. I think it’s important to know these when it comes to conservation because these are the things people will fight for.

If your group is fighting, perhaps there are identities being challenged. If working on a conflictual issue around nature and the environment, consider asking what outdoor/nature activities people might consider as part of their identity. It can give you more clues about who’s in the room and can tell you what people may be fighting about. Or you can even use it as a tool for a newer group to get to know one another in a fun and unique way. You might be surprised by the answers and shake up some assumptions, which are good things.

***What 1-2 nature related activities, if taken away from you, would deeply affect who you are?***



As a side note, I want you to consider how you might answer that question yourself. I want you to imagine you can't participate in those activities any longer because people with more power than you told you can't be or do that anymore. If that doesn't feel good to you, one can also imagine what it has felt like for Indigenous peoples experiencing identity erasure through removal from ancestral lands and restricting of nature-based ways of being.

## Environmental experiences

Thomashow points to three experiences that he finds people are willing to talk about when bringing a diverse group of people together. Those are childhood memories of special places, contemplation of wild places, and perceptions of disturbed places] (Thomashow 1995).

### 3 Experiences for Group Dialogue:

- **Childhood memories of special places**
- **Contemplation of wild places**
- **Perceptions of disturbed places**

In the human-nature workshop and nature classes, I ask people to think about their earliest recollection of time with nature. Often, this earliest experience influences what people are doing for work today, though many had not thought about it. Along with some of our greatest memories, our early recollections could also be how we developed environmental fears.

With wild places, I think of a recent experience helping an intern at the Aldo Leopold Foundation. When asked about how I describe wilderness, I said it was a state of mind.

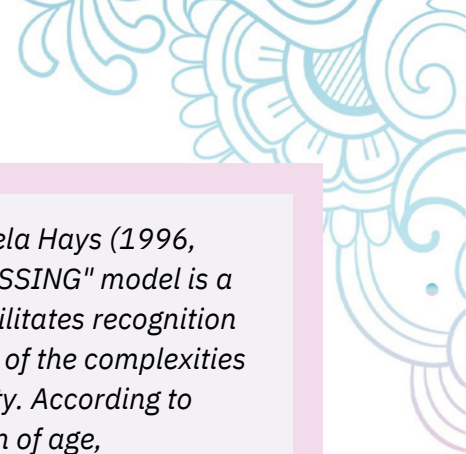
I don't believe there is a such thing as an environment where people don't belong, but I have been to wild places where people are not the dominant force. I don't have to go back to them to experience them again. I can do that in my mind through memories. How do you contemplate wild places?

Finally, we don't think about it much but our perceptions of disturbed places are also important. Author Trebbe Johnson, in her book and work on *Radical Joy in Hard Times* tells us not to forget about what she calls, "orphaned places." We can still see and create beauty there. Some of our most disturbed places are those that are ready to be restored or prepared for the changes in landscapes yet to come.

Consider sharing your contemplations around childhood special places, wild places, and disturbed places with your team. Notice any diversity of thought and creativity that might arise. These might even get us talking about mission and purpose in case anyone needs to be reminded.

## Environmental Identity art

For the past few years, I've included an Environmental Identity assignment as a part of Nature in Counseling class (for therapists and counselors) and in the human-nature workshop I mentioned earlier for the conservation community. I love this assignment so much for its ability to organically lead a group to topics about diversity and inclusion. It helps us see how our environmental identity is formed through various influences in our lives. In sharing the stories, we learn how much we assume about others and their relationship with nature that may or may not be true.



I won't go into the details here, but we use the Hayes ADDRESSING model for the typical identity pieces and how they might have influences their relationship with the environment (see sidebar).

When I first completed my own project, some insights for me were:

- Growing up on a farm meant that death wasn't foreign to me.
- Getting dirty was easy, with the animals and in our garden.
- My German, rural and Christian heritage meant that nature was to be more dominated than stewarded. We did a better job of stewarding when I was young, but now it is part of industrial agriculture.
- My love of water comes from being able to go to the local river on the rare day off to play. Today, any form of water is where I find the most peace.
- I was heavily influenced by Born Free and Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom in wanting to be a tiger biologist. I became a biologist and just got realistic about my ability to study tigers.
- My community was very monochrome in ethnicity and spirituality. In other words, my lens to the world as a child was very limited.
- My time as an exchange student in Australia made me want to adventure to other beautiful places in the world. My trips are where my lens expanded.

The insights from a group are always interesting, and often the larger group the more interesting. What I tell participants through this process is that there are no good or bad relationships with nature. We all must grow.

*Developed by Pamela Hays (1996, 2008), the "ADDRESSING" model is a framework that facilitates recognition and understanding of the complexities of individual identity. According to Hays, consideration of age, developmental disabilities, acquired disabilities, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, indigenous group membership, nationality, and gender contributes to a complete understanding of cultural identity.*

For more information:

<https://www.ohio.edu/cas/psychology/diversity/addressing-model>

Let go of thinking there is only one right way, know that we aren't perfect (I own more than I need) and that we all want a better planet. This isn't about right or wrong, it's about learning how to be open to the beautiful spectrums of life.

As groups have exchanged their identity drawings/maps, discussions about our limited lenses arise easily. By using drawings and art, people seem to be much more engaged to learn about each other. I get so much joy out of watching these interactions. Wouldn't you love for the people in your workplace and constituents be more engaged?



The Dovetail Team participated in answering the question, "What would you say are two nature-related activities you would incorporate into your identity? I am a \_\_\_\_." This Word Cloud is a visual representation of the words they came up with.



### FOR CONTEMPLATION

- How might an early childhood memory with nature or experience with a special place contribute to the work I do today? How did that happen and why is the work important to me?
- What parts of nature inspire me and what do I fear? Where did those come from?
- How did where I grew up and went to school (or church/synagogue/mosque/temple) influence how I think about the environment?
- What assumptions regarding environmental identity or beliefs might I be making about my team or constituents? How might I assess these assumptions?
- What do I believe about wilderness, wild places and disturbed places? How did I determine my nature values?
- What parts of my environmental identity am I willing to fight for?

#### For more:

If you are curious about environmental identity or want to conduct a workshop with your team, please reach out to me at [michelle@anavahconsulting.com](mailto:michelle@anavahconsulting.com). I am hoping to do more research on this topic in 2024, so more to come.

#### Resources:

Clayton S. (2003). "Environmental identity: A conceptual and an operational definition," in *Identity and the natural environment: The psychological significance of nature*, eds Clayton S., Opatow S. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; ), 45–66.

Thomashow, M. (1995). *Ecological Identity: Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist.* MIT Press.

Johnson, T. (2018). *Radical Joy for Hard Times: Finding Meaning and Making Beauty in Earth's Broken Places.* North Atlantic Books

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