Part III

How stories help to understand how the world matters to us

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The BIOMOT project aims to find out what the secret behind the motivations is of those few who do move into committed action for nature. What drives them? And can these drives be translated into conditions for more effective biodiversity policies?

Most people know that there are good arguments to protect biodiversity. Yet only few act accordingly. Apparently, knowing that it would be rational to do something is not enough. Conversely, those who do come into action refer, when asked, only seldom to abstract arguments to explain why they act. They tell a narrative, a story that explains why it makes sense to act for nature.

The philosopher Bernard Williams has argued that a detached, impartial perspective fails to provide a motivation for action. We do not act out of pure rational reasons. Instead, we only will act when we are engaged in a morally significant world. Therefore, moral philosophy should start “from the ways in which we experience our ethical life.” It should take its starting point in existing moral experiences. Unfortunately, dominant environmental ethics has done the opposite and has focused on rational justification. A good example is environmental ethicist Paul Taylor. According to Taylor, respecting the inherent value of all living beings is the most rational and therefore also the most ethical thing to do. The same would hold for ecosystem services; it is rational to maintain them. For Taylor, that insight generates sufficient reasons to act; because acting rationally is or should be imperative.

The divorce between rationality and reason

Why should the finding that something is rational automatically prompt a motivation to act? Taylor does not ask that question. That is strange, since we know that most people do not act automatically because something is rational. Neither is it true that everything that is rational is by definition good. Only those who already believe that rationality should be the guiding principle in our lives could be expected to act on intrinsic values or ecosystem services – all others will not. Something different or extra has to be there, a something that Williams calls commitment and that others call connectedness – to persons, to nature, or to other things that matter to us; in short: to something meaningful.

Things that are meaningful to us are often very personal and subjective, not general, universal and rational. Yet, they are our real reasons to act. A paradoxical consequence of this ‘divorce between ratio and reason’ is that you can have irrational reasons, and meaningless rationalities, a consequence that throws up all sorts of problems also for biodiversity policies. For instance, does the economic valuation of ecosystem services only produce meaningless rationality?

This divorce between ratio and reason did not always exist. Ancient Greek moral thought, for instance, assumed that the world was a wonderfully ordered whole, physically and morally at the same time, a cosmos in which everything had its natural place and purpose. In other words, the world was a whole in which what is and what
ought to be overlapped and could be understood in a single line of thought. What you were defined how you ought to act. Life, all life, has a purpose and a meaning – else it would not be.

Since then, our worldview has changed drastically. The underpinnings of the Greek cosmological worldview have disappeared. We no longer believe to live in a morally ordered universe. The ‘real’ and ‘objective’ world as revealed through science is seen as merely factual and morally neutral, and our moral judgments are seen as nothing but purely subjective judgments, as a result of highly personal taste. Interestingly however, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) has shown that remnants of classical Greek ethics still exist in the current moral perception of Western people. We still feel that there is a moral order to the world that we should try to attune ourselves to, and ‘doing’ so tends to give a feeling that life makes sense. The only difference between us moderns and the ancient Greeks is that whereas for the Greeks the moral order of the world could be revealed through science and metaphysics, for us the world only appears morally meaningful in virtue of the stories we tell about it. The meaningful order we experience has become embedded in our narratives.

The quest for meaning
Narrative ethics tries to do justice to this phenomenon. It does so by collecting and examining the stories people tell that give meaning to their life and role in the world, and explain their action and moral choices. It turned out that the social and physical environment, and within the last one, nature experiences, often play a special role in these stories. As philosopher John O’Neill recently put it, “we make sense of our lives by placing them in a larger narrative context […]. Environments matter because they embody that larger context.” A person who is motivated to act, will do so out of a feeling that this action makes sense in a life that makes sense, embedded in a meaningful world.

A narrative does not merely depict the world, it lets the world present itself in a particular way. It, in a way, creates the world by bringing it into life and ordering it. A narrated world is a meaningfully ordered world. But narration works through language, and because of this, it will always be dependent on specific historic cultural settings and contingencies, and a specific here and now. In other words: stories will never be universal, impartial, or objective. These local and historical contextual conditions and traditions, and the stories based on them are vital to understand why people act, e.g. why people act for nature or biodiversity.

In the BIOMOT project, we have used this insight to collect 213 life stories of people who were motivated to act for nature or other societal causes. We did this in the expectation that those stories will reveal that their actions give meaning to their lives and are embedded in a social context that grants existential meaning to (acting for) nature and biodiversity. From this perspective, one would expect that for people who are highly motivated to act for biodiversity, the natural world is important, not just as a valuable and valued object that needs to be appreciated, but as a meaningfully whole that provides a context for self-realization.
The interviews indeed seem to validate our assumptions. Hardly any interviewee expresses that rationalities of intrinsic value or ecosystem services has had any motivational impact. Overwhelmingly, the life stories themselves turned out to be themselves structured as narratives (*not surprisingly of course*), but also more specifically as a *quest for meaning*. Many interviewees recalled their life story as a journey during which a moral *meaning was discovered in the world*, a meaning that compelled the need to act and made acting for nature the natural way to react and to become. These stories can also inspire others to act for nature. That is how stories work.

**The narrative perspective**

Motivated people need to explain their motivation to act for nature through a story of meaning for several reasons. First, they themselves often got inspired through stories of other motivated people; apparently, there is something about the way that stories disclose reality that is crucial for getting involved. Second, many motivated people feel that they want to inspire others to get engaged as well. Many want to use stories as a means to motivate or convince others to engage with what they see as being of utter importance. Third, a narrative perspective will add to this, that the stories that highly motivated people will also be used to ‘remind’ themselves what their life is about, and how their life makes sense as part of a sensible, meaningful whole. In other words, stories about the meaning of nature are not just means of communicating the meaning and value of nature; they are also the medium in which these meanings exist. Stories open up a meaningful world that can be expressed, shared and cultivated; without the cultural context, the language traditions and the language communities, the care for nature will not have a foothold in our lives. In that sense, conserving and stimulating a culture of nature is just as important as caring for nature itself.

Policy makers can use this insight to promote the embedding of biodiversity in narratives: narratives of places and landscapes, narratives of evolution, narratives of human lives. This requires the promotion and continuation of languages, practices and cultures of connectedness with nature. And these, in turn, as other findings of BIOMOT will show, are conditioned by opportunities of true encounter of humans with nature.

**Findings**

**Self realisation**

In many interviews we find evidence that to motivated people, nature is not primarily seen as a valued object but rather as a meaningful context for self realisation – for having a meaningful life. Roughly speaking, people tell at least two types of stories when asked to explain how their motivation to act for nature came about.

**Home coming and liberation**

Many interviewees tell a story about finding their commitment to biodiversity in terms of a gradual re-discovery, a kind of ‘homecoming’. Many interviewees report that at one point in their life, often in young adulthood, they discovered their true passion or destination and from then on decided to devote their lives to nature.
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protection. Very often what they discovered is experienced as a re-discovery of something that implicitly they already knew earlier in their life, in childhood, and was lost later on in their lives. The rediscovery of this earlier passion is often depicted as a moment of liberation, a liberation from societal habits, social pressure, cultural distractions, something had to be overcome. In this kind of story, finding a meaningful connection to nature is presented as a rediscovery of what had been important in their lives all along. Often, this process was initiated by significant others – inspiring people that showed them that an alternative way of life existed, sometimes it was discovered almost by accident.

**Over coming crisis**

For other interviewees, the sense of re-discovery was less outspoken. For them, discovering a meaning in nature coincided with the moment of crisis in which their lives were put upside down, or –less dramatically put – when they went through events that shed new light on their life and the meaning of their life. In some cases, interviewees tell a story in which they experienced a personal crisis after which they discovered another sense of self. In other cases, they met other people that provided them with a new model of how to order one’s life, often a new life style in which nature did play an important role. In general, the meaning they discovered was an answer to a perceived crisis of meaning resulting from an experience of coming to a dead end in their lives.

**The ordering power of narratives**

Life stories typically reconstruct a life by connecting a series of separate life events into an order that makes sense. In this sense, a life story brings unity to a life, it constructs one’s life as a whole, rather than merely articulate that life. It is through the telling of the life story that we can present (to ourselves and to others) our lives as a whole. Moreover, this narrative process always works backwards - the life story always consists of a re-narration of one’s life from the vantage point to now. New events can force us to re-narrate our life story, because new events may shed new light on past life events that earlier were deemed insignificant, but suddenly appear in a new order. Life stories are themselves quests for meanings, in which people attempt to find the connection between what at first might appear to be a series of random or separate events. A life story connects the separate dots of the past, connects them in an order that makes up a story, re-constructs this life as a whole. As soon as a person finds an appropriate story about his or her life, this will often have the character of a re-discovery, in the sense of an experience “yes, this is how it was”, “I now can see clearly what has been the meaning of it all along.” In other words, the fact that people experience a feeling of “homecoming” is what one can expect in a life story, since an experience of finding meaning in one’s life very often is an experience of things and events falling into place, i.e. appearing in an order that was not made but that already existed.

We may conclude that in general, life stories are not just a mean to explain to others what happened in one’s life, but also a way to ‘remind ‘ ourselves what our life is about. Yet, this very feature of life stories, also comes with a risk: life stories very easily turn into fixed stories, that get repeated over and over again, that petrify the
meaning of a life. For this reason there is, of course, also a risk in asking people to tell their life story and explain how they became the highly motivated person they are. Since a story reconstructs a series of events in hindsight, it easily distorts, and run the risk of confabulating causal relations that in fact can be questioned.

In the BIOMOT interviews, we tried to prevent this confabulation from happening by repeatedly forcing people to include specific facts about their life story (When? What? Where?): e.g. by explicitly inviting them to structure their life story in different age-phases of their youth. This may have disrupted a standard account of a life, and forces the interviewee to think back on his life anew, and actively reconstruct the way their key motivation developed. This cannot change the fact that a life narrative is per se a backward looking reconstruction of a life, but it does interrupt a possible standard story that an interviewee might have constructed earlier. By critically challenging the interviewees to re-narrate their life story with the inclusion of specific place and nature-related events one may hope to arrive at a life story that does reveal something of the deeper motivational reasons and meanings at play in a person’s life project.

**Nature as meaningful context**

A similar thing can also be said about the meaning of nature as it comes forward in stories about nature. As mentioned earlier, in the interviews we typically see that nature does not come forward as an object of value, but rather as a meaningful context. Nature is the context of one’s life, but the meaning of nature extends beyond oneself. Nature means more than merely the context of my life; it is the world as such. According to narrative theory, the moral meaning of nature or the natural world that appears in a life story exists in language - having the experience of nature as meaningful context will be dependent on the presentation of the world through the story about the world, as told by others and by ourselves. In other words, the moral meaning of it is dependent on a cultural context, tradition or social interpretation that opens up the world to us as being meaningful. The story is not merely a mean of communicating the meaning; it is the medium in which it exists, and therefore a condition for its existence. Earlier, we argued that we expect that the experience of nature as a meaningful order can still be found in contemporary moral sensibility – as a remainder of pre-modern (classic Greek and early Christian) cosmology. Yet, even when nature is perceived as morally ordered and meaningful order, it will probably not present itself as a moral pre-given order that humans merely have to register and observe, as it did in classic pre-modern cosmology.

The interviews seem to confirm that many interviewees indeed have a moral sensitivity for nature as a morally significant order, which provides a context in which meaning can be found or created. Some recurring elements in the interviews can be understood from this analogy with classic ethics. Yet, we can also see clearly some differences. Below we focus on some key aspects of the BIOMOT interviews that resemble elements of premodern cosmology, we will see how these resurface in contemporary moral sensibility, and examine how they are related to motivations to act for nature.
Nature and enjoyment
Humans love to be in nature and it makes them happy. For many interviewees, this is an important motivation for their commitment to protect nature, many use the term when asked why nature is important for them. Many interviewees recall that being out in nature was important for them as a child; many still have vivid memories of these experiences, and believe that these have been formative – played a big role in what they have become later in their life. Some talk about the experience of spending time outdoors as an antidote to the dullness, alienation or lack of freedom in everyday life, e.g. in schools or other societal institutions. Being in nature made them happy because it made them feel alive and free. Some interviewees directly relate this sense of personal happiness with their key passion: they feel that it is important to show others that nature is important for leading a full and rewarding life.

The happiness that nature brings about in people’s lives is often interpreted in terms of ecosystem service. From an ecosystem service approach, the happiness that one experiences while being in nature is typically seen as a psychological effect of a person’s interaction with nature. If we think of happiness as a state of mind, as a psychological response to a stimulus, an effect of something nature does to us, if we think of happiness in nature in these purely psychological terms, it follows that we can conceive of the experience in terms of a service provided by nature/ecosystems. Nature provides us with a service by causing pleasant experiences of happiness.

However, if we look more closely at the narratives of the life story interviews, we can notice narrative elements that seem to be add odds with such an interpretation in terms of ecosystem services, and another more appropriate interpretation of happiness is called for.

Happiness as fulfilment: eudemonia
In many interviews, people talk about the happiness of being in nature in terms of fulfilment or completion, they say that being in nature causes a feeling of being ‘at home’, a feeling of true fulfilment. This particular articulation of happiness has strong similarities to the way how nature functioned in classic cosmology. In classic times, the natural world was seen as a cosmos; the word cosmos also meant a gem or a jewel. Nature as cosmos was a beautifully ordered system in which all the parts contributed to a larger, beautiful whole, in which everything made sense: the natural order of things. For Aristotle, this notion of an objective order in nature was intimately tied to the idea of a good life: for humans to live a good life was to lead a life in accordance with human nature, which in turn meant a life attuned to the overall order of the world. A good human life was a life that was in accordance with human’s place in nature, in line with its natural goals or purpose. Ultimately, a good life was a life that was appropriate to its place in the natural order of things. Moreover, according to Aristotle, humans are naturally oriented towards finding their natural destination or purpose. His ethics assumed that the good life was a life in line with the natural human desire for happiness, in other words, the desire to live a good life, that is, a life in accordance to nature, was an innate desire in all human beings. The task of ethics was not, as in modernity, to show people what they should do irrespective of their desires, rather it was to help people see and understand how their natural desires
were to be understood and guided so that people could actually flourish, that is, succeed in developing their human potential and find their appropriate place within the larger whole. For Aristotle, human happiness was not so much a psychological state of mind, as we tend to think today, but rather flourishing, which is the result of a good ‘fit’ between one’s life, one’s own nature and the order of the natural world. According to Aristotle, all humans strive towards happiness, which for him means that all humans strive to fully develop their human capacities in such a way as is in accordance to their nature. The happiest person is the person who is most successful in living up to his or her human potential, a happy person feels that he or she lives in accordance with his or her own nature, which, in the Greek view, will always be attuned to nature in the larger overall sense of the word. Finding one’s place in the larger order of things, and finding one’s own true nature coincide. What makes one happy is the coinciding of finding one’s own natural goal and finding a place within the world.

In the interviews we often find words that resonate with this classic Greek thinking about human happiness and human flourishing. Happiness is seen as a form of fulfilment, of finding one’s own nature, one’s true self, one’s natural goal, and to many of the interviewees this happiness is connected to a sense of connectedness to nature. Apparently, an Aristotelian type of thinking is working at the background, providing us with an alternative frame of interpretation for understanding statements that being in nature leads to happiness.

This similarity with classic though may help explain, for instance, why some interviewees have difficulty with the question whether they real passion is about nature or about humans. From classic Greek cosmology, it would be difficult to distinguish whether some action is motivated for nature or for human wellbeing. In line with this, many interviewees state that they do not see these as mutually exclusive answers. This is the answer that one might expect from a classic Greek cosmology: human nature is part of nature as a whole, and human flourishing is understood as the fulfilment of the natural goal of human nature, human fulfilment presupposes humans being part of nature. Therefore when asked if their engagement is with people or with nature, many interviewees state that for them the relation between nature and human flourishing is fairly straightforward. In a classic cosmology, both cannot be distinguished; from a modern cosmology the choice between either one of these goals will be fairly straightforward too.

**The order of nature reconsidered**

Yet, some interviewees have second thoughts about this connection, and seem more aware of the problems connected to the classic ethical idea of human flourishing in nature. Might it be because they are aware of the fact that the Greek cosmology, and the classic assumption that human nature has a good fit within the overall order of things is no longer undoubtedly true? One of the interviewees seems to clearly struggle with this dilemma. He too seems to recognize the experience that the natural world provides a context for true self-realisation, and can be important to find one’s true self. Yet, he also seems to be aware that the relation between human flourishing and the overall order of nature in contemporary times is far from straightforward.
ambivalence, and the embarrassment it causes, can clearly be seen in one of the interviews (Ned 17), when the question is whether the key passion is about nature or about humans:

A: “...this is my actual motive: I like it when people are alive”.
Q: “I immediately get from this that this [your key passion] is about people instead of nature. Do you think that everything you do for nature is motivated by something you want for people?”
A: “There are two answers possible. The first answer is the simplest: yes, I sometimes say we are more a people movement than a nature movement. The other answer is that it isn’t a very relevant question because – well perhaps it is for you but not for me – because in the end it is all the same whether you are talking about the intrinsic value of nature or at the core it comes to this .... to keep it simple: yes, people”
Q: “Could you explain a bit more about what you meant that it all comes down to the same thing?”
A: “No.”

This interviewee too went to the outdoors as a child very often, and it was important to him. But when the interviewer then suggested that the reason for going to nature might be that nature was a contrast world to which one could flee leaving the societal bonds behind, the response is hesitation: “that would be almost too nice to be believable. [...] No, probably I did it because it was fun.” But then the interviewee also remarks that now, on a later age, being an adult, he does the same things in a more deliberate and conscious manner. Apparently, the fit between one’s own nature and nature did not come across spontaneously, but as a result of a conscious choice to live one’s life in accordance with nature.

Also with regards to what happiness is, the interviewee seems to hesitate between a modern state-of-mind- concept of happiness and a classic idea of happiness as fulfilment of one’s nature within the overall order of things:

“[being] happy, having a nice life is possible without nature. But real fulfilment, real, real fulfilment, for that you need nature to be fully human on all levels”. [my emphasis, MD]

Here we can see that the motivation to act for nature as a meaningful world is entrenched in a worldview that has one foot in modernity and one foot in pre-modern times. Only within a convincing, inspiring story, the deeper connection with nature can exist. It is not by accident that in the work of this interviewee storytelling plays an important role. It is the story that brings to the fore the natural world as a meaningful context for a fulfilling human life.

**Learning, beauty and connectedness**

A similar hesitation regarding the meaning of nature as a given moral order for human flourishing can also be found in the responses of another interviewee (Ned 15). As mentioned, in the classic cosmology, the moral order of nature could be discovered
through science, since the natural world was actually structured according to a moral principle. In contrast our contemporary moral sensitivities experience a similar moral order of the world, yet we know that this order is created through and dependent on human interpretations and storytelling. For interviewee Ned15, having an ecological understanding of the workings of nature, and having knowledge about the specifics in nature, e.g. of the importance of the way specific species interact in nature, is of key importance to a good relationship to nature. When the interviewee suggests that all these understandings seem rather cognitively biased and if there is not also an element of care and connectedness tied to this deeper understanding of nature. This interviewee also states that for him, knowledge is a way to avoid a merely superficial understanding and appreciation of nature. Superficial enjoyment of nature is merely focused on the perceived beauty of things. According to this person, there is something more at stake in our relation with nature, and gaining insight in the structure of nature, and seeking an understanding of why things are the way they are play a key role in that process. When the interviewer then suggests that this understanding sounds rather abstract, and does not automatically lead to a commitment with the world, the conversation takes an interesting turn:

Q: “...you talked about richness and about complexity of nature but also about that it is beautiful. Do you see these as different things or the same?”

A: “Yes that is very, very intertwined. [...] Beautiful is not enough for me, not because it can also be very fragile. [...] But if you look more into it – like you look at how and why [...] there are so many hovering flies in that [place] – then suddenly you ... [signs of hesitation, MD.] I just think it's really nice to see to see the connections to see the relationships so, ehm yeah, it really matters that you can make a distinction between one species and another, between this and that flower. That also applies to animals: it's just really essential to see whether eh it is a predator or prey; or that something is tasty or not or toxic. These distinctions are just very essential to understand why the world is as it is. [my emphasis, MD]

When the interviewer asks to clarify how the understanding of the intricate interconnectedness of nature leads to a feeling of involvement with nature, it appears as if the interviewee has difficulty finding the right words. He merely repeats the statement that both aspects are related, but cannot really explain why:

A: “There is just a very beautiful structure that came into being in millions of years and we are part of that and if you if you have the idea that you start to understand it that is just very exciting, an adventure.”

Q: “Do you think people get involved or could become part of that complexity or is it more about observing it from a distance?”

A: “That too, yes. But the trick is to pull people into this perspective as far as possible. I really think that in that way it will emerge that you really become part of the system and you start feeling that you should not be inconsiderate with nature. If all things are intertwined then you will be careful not to break something or to disrupt a connecting piece or to disconnect a relationship
because that would just be shortsighted. It is also short sighted if people refuse to get to know each other. [...] But anyway, this is all rather abstract; meanwhile in practice you work very concretely on educational projects.” [my emphasis, MD]

Here, too, the interviewee confirms that there is a strong connection between an understanding of the order in nature and a connection to that, but cannot explain why in an objective manner. We might interpret this hesitation as an implicit recognition that a story needs to be told – “the trick is to pull people into this perspective”. Only by telling a story, and only from within the context of that story, a connection exists between understanding of nature and intricate interconnected complex system and a feeling of connectedness and belonging to and involvement with that system. Objectively, someone could always decide to be indifferent towards the intricate beauty of nature, but within the context of a story about the beauty of the natural order, these interconnections of nature appear as meaningful, as a context for human flourishing and as worth protecting.

**Stories of nature as inspiration**

Other interviewees also talk about their attempts to involve and inspire other people to engage themselves too into protecting nature. Storytelling is crucial for many of these interviewees.

One interviewee clearly states that stories present the world of nature to us in a meaningful way. One interviewee clearly states the importance of stories for opening up the world:

“What you think about an apple? [...] A religious person will start to ask about Adam and Eve. My child may talk about candied apples. Others say you can make cider from apples and yet another person will say something else again. [...] Before you know it you'll get all kinds of stories and so on, a Swiss will tell the story of William Tell who had an apple on his head with a bow and arrow [...] you get many different stories, every culture deals with it differently, and that actually makes it special: this way nature can get an extra dimension, becomes more interesting.”

The same interviewee then goes on and contrasts this cultural diverse image of nature to a utility-oriented approach to nature. He talks about a case where someone approaches a forest merely as a location for nordic walking, and tries to pass through it as quickly as possible. In that case “you will not experience nature at all, you will forget about the importance of nature, of fertile soil...”. To understand and experience nature as something meaningful, you need to pay attention to nature, but also, you need to tell a story: “It all depends on how you tell the story, but the story has to be true” (NL33)
Many other interviewees see storytelling as a way of communicating insights into the workings of nature to others, but interestingly, most of them also believe that these stories can also bring about “enthusiasm” and the desire to protect nature. Some explain that they not merely want to “raise people’s awareness” about nature, but also inspire them, and make them “enthusiastic”, (NL29). Others stress that knowledge about nature and the commitment to protect nature somehow belong together. “With nature it is as with humans: the more you try to recognize and understand the other the more you will value and understand it” (NL15). But this understanding of nature is not merely observing facts, but adopting a certain view of nature. Once you have taken people along in a specific outlook on nature, in which they become aware of the interconnection of all things in nature, and our belonging to nature, “than you’ve got them where you want, and will play a home game: then you will be able to make people enthusiastic and make them seek a real connection to nature” (NL15).

**Autonomy, freedom, wildness and otherness**

In many life story interviews, interviewees stress that finding a sense of autonomy was crucial in their development. Many reported that they first had to break free from a societal bonds and role that were imposed on them before they could discover their own drive and their own sense of identity. This notion of autonomy is often thought of in terms of freedom or individual liberty to act, freedom of impositions by others, etcetera. It is tempting to interpret these experiences of autonomy as pointing to the absence of any external force of outside demand.

Yet, in many life stories, we also encounter articulations of experiences of freedom or autonomy that beckon a different interpretation. Some interviews suggest that the feeling of autonomy that is so important for people, was not an experience of being cut loose from all bonds and being an autonomous, isolated individual. Rather, some interviewees stress the importance of nature being present as a realm of wildness, where one can discover this sense of autonomy. In these cases, being in nature makes one aware that it is possible to break away from societal restrictions and demands. Nature is encountered as a realm where one can discover one’s self. Nature does not have an opinion of us, it gives us the freedom to decide what to do with our life because it does not impose demands on us. It is the very indifference of nature that opens up a space of freedom, that seems to be important in many people’s life..

The notion of autonomy that people discover is somewhat a paradoxical: being in nature as a realm of indifference gives us the opportunity to experience a sense of freedom towards societal bonds. But this very experience of nature itself seems to lay a claim on us, for it seems that it is this experience that for some people forms the basis for a sense of commitment to and engagement with this nature. Nature provides us with a sense of freedom by not imposing any norm upon us, and some people for that very reason feel some sense of duty towards that nature to protect it and care for it. In this experience of wildness, nature is not primarily discovered as an object that one should ascribe value to – although arguably, the experience of nature as a realm of freedom is valuable to people – but rather, nature is discovered as a realm of where humans can find their true identity, find themselves.
Many of the interviewees report that they had these experiences of freedom in nature. These experiences were their reason to decide to help protect nature. That does not mean that they value nature as a valuable object, rather, they appreciate nature as a realm that humans cannot do without, wild nature is appreciated because it provides them with a context in which they could discover themselves, find a sense of autonomy or authenticity that elsewhere they could not have found.

In some of the interviews, we can notice that some people refuse to identify what it is in nature that should be protected. They value nature for its undetermined, open and wild character, and state that determining the value of nature would be a failure to recognize this quality of nature. It is telling that one of the interviewees (Ned17) refused to fill in the open Q-analysis card and decided the card should be left blank. The same person also articulates that the very sense of open and indeterminate character of nature is what should be recognized and appreciated.

“I am thinking about why do I do something for nature: on the one hand I say because I like it, but mostly I think it is because I am a bit scared about the situation in which people have total control. I think that is the core of it: if you for example look at the financial crisis when people are in total control with computers and also politics and everything, I have less confidence in that than in a world in which part of life is not determined by humans but by natural laws and so on. And that is why I am for nature.”

Q: “Do you need such a world in which humans do not have total control?”

A: “Well, I am working on that a lot with future visioning and I am writing a book about it. I have the feeling that a certain wildness is very important within order and within the artificiality of things. Nature is a sort of safety lane: on the one hand as a director it corrects in makes sure that we do not choose the wrong path, it moderates us a bit. On the other hand it is a sort of crack in our artificiality. To cite Leonard Cohen ‘there is a crack in everything, that is how the light gets in.’ I think that is beautiful. So where in the past nature was necessary for survival and nature had to be fought to live longer and not get eaten by the wolves, nature today is for a large part our crack in our own artificial the entrance the beam of light the oasis.”

What is interesting in this part of the conversation is that the interviewee stresses that nature protection is no longer solely necessary for our survival – for it provides ecosystem services, one might add. “I do not think we need nature to have a good time or to be ourselves or to be happy in the end it is not about survival but about other things.” Rather, we need to protect nature for the sense of openness and freedom that otherwise would get lost in our modern world.
In another interview (Ned15), this value of the indeterminate, wild character of nature is stressed also. At first instance, this conservationist and rewilders seem to stress the importance of ecological knowledge of nature.

“in the Netherlands there are almost 1500 species which all have a place all of which have a relationship to us. Well, I know only a fraction of it, but the more you know and learn the more interesting it becomes and the richer I think my world is. [...] It's interesting to get to know people from other cultures. You can also shield yourself from that like ‘we don’t want to do anything with it’, well then you make your world even smaller and quite narrow, which leads quickly to very negative sentiments. Well, with nature it is not much different: the more you seek to understand the other, seek to understand what's behind it all, you are going to appreciate it and understand more.”

But then, he goes on and criticizes the very attempt to determine value and meaning of nature, also among fellow nature conservationists:

“[I want to help people to] take nature into account when they make choices. And in such a way that nature can be nature and is not, say, eh, eh, too much pushed into a concept by our so-called stewardship. Yeah that's a also a kind of life fulfilment: that you're trying to get people out of that arrogant attitude in relation to nature and also: let them delve into what nature is (.) instead of imposing your own preconceptions about nature on it. Again just as with people: if I have a conversation with you and I already know who you are – just a girl with long black hair, bit of a leftist type – at that time it's actually no longer a conversation but I project my judgments on you; then I am not really interested in who you are. […] I prefer to talk with people: I just want to know who you are, why you are who you are then it then it starts to be interesting. Nature is no different. If you think nature is far too often like ‘I have to take care of it’ or ‘that is an exotic species, that should go’. If you look at nature in that way, you are really directing it instead of trying to look deeper and ask ‘precisely why is this species here?’ or ‘why this is happening now?’ ”

He stresses the importance of a kind of humility that refuses to control nature or impose a particular judgment or evaluation upon nature, but instead remains open to nature as an independent realm. This sense of respect is directly connected to the notion of knowledge of nature, or rather, an awareness of the limitation of our knowledge and a sincere attempt to observe and respect nature as it is. Whereas in modern science, having knowledge of the workings of nature is and what services it may provide in itself not yet morally meaningful, but can inform our decisions, in the view proposed here, understanding the deeper narrative meaning of nature also implies respect.
Conclusion

The interviews seem to confirm that for many people who are motivated to act for biodiversity, their motivation is rooted in a moral sensitivity for nature as a morally significant order that provides a context in which meaning can be found or created. We have tried to show that this worldview has some recurring elements that can be understood using an analogy with classic ethics, but also saw that the narrative view of nature is much less fixed and fully dependent on a language and language practices.

From a narrative perspective, meanings that people experience in nature exist in and through the medium of language - having the experience of nature as meaningful context is dependent on the presentation or interpretation of the world through stories, most often stories told by others. That is not to say that meanings are constructed through stories from scratch, rather, the experience of meaning that people have beckon to be understood and articulated in language. Therefore, it is dependent on a cultural context, tradition or social interpretation that opens up the world to us as being meaningful. For that reason, we also need to protect the cultural resources that enable people to become sensitized to the meaning of nature.

Stories about the meaning of nature are not just means of communicating the meaning and value of nature, they are also the medium in which these meanings exist. Stories open up a meaningful world that can be expressed, shared and cultivated; without the cultural context, the language traditions and the language communities, the care for nature will not have a foothold in our lives. In that sense, conserving and stimulating a culture of nature is just as important as caring for nature itself.

Policy makers can use this insight to promote the embedding of biodiversity in narratives: narratives of places and landscapes, narratives of evolution, narratives of human lives. This requires the promotion and continuation of languages, practices and cultures of connectedness with nature.
References


