

*inform, inspire, imagine*



# The Silk Mill Vision of a Nature Connected Society

Reflections on Nature Connection in Policy and Practice

The Silk Mill, Derby, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2023

Nature Connectedness Research Group

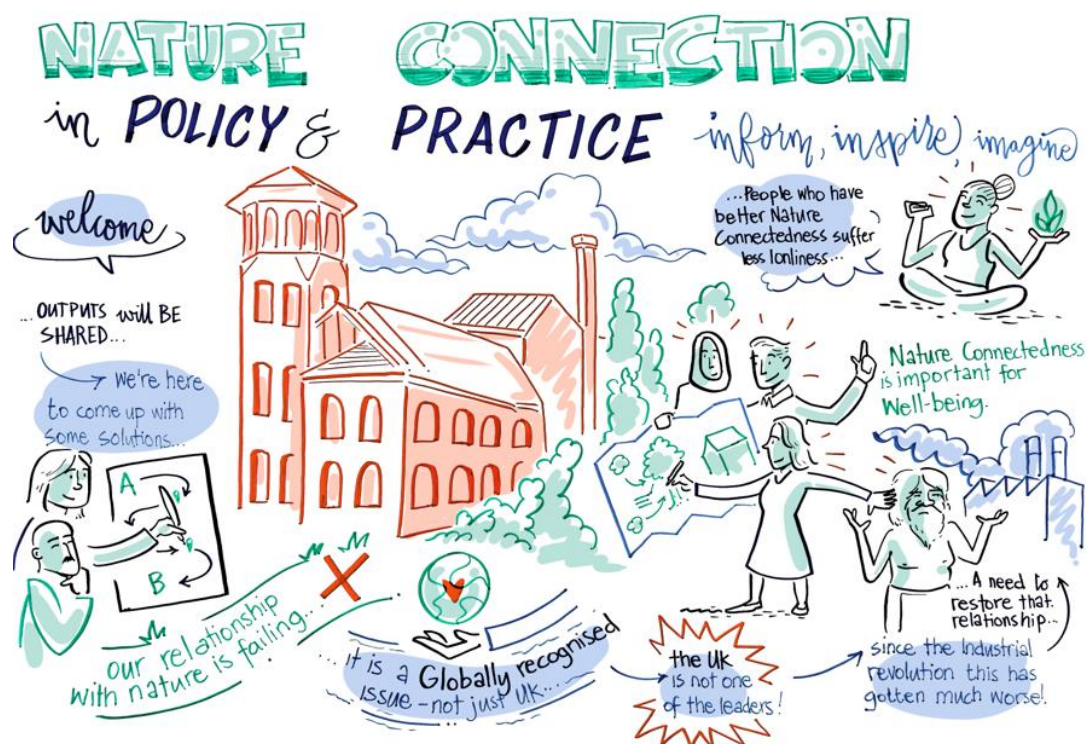
# Introduction

Major institutions around the world are realising that a sustainable future requires a new relationship with nature. From the UN commissioned [Stockholm+50](#) evidence review to the '[Exiting the Anthropocene? Exploring fundamental change in our relationship with nature](#)' briefing from European Environment Agency, environment science-policy thinking is pushing beyond what has gone before. This recognition and progress is driven by research, but the application of that research into policy solutions requires new thinking that goes beyond a focus on technological solutions to treat the symptoms of the failing relationship, the visible events of biodiversity loss and climate warming, to strengthen the human-nature relationship.

The Nature Connection in Policy and Practice event, hosted by University of Derby's Nature Connectedness Research Group, aimed to share this research and its applications, and provide a context for generating the kind of new thinking needed for transforming society's relationship with nature. It was held at Derby's Silk Mill – the site of the world's first factory, a starting point of an industrial relationship with nature based on use and control, so a great place to start to forge a new relationship with nature based on care and reciprocity.

The event was attended by around 45 people from a range of local and national government bodies, NGOs, universities, SMEs and public services representing academic, policy, environmental, legal, education, local government, and creative sectors. A live scribe from [Burograph](#) produced illustrations that captured the talks and ideas expressed over the course of the day.

The event set out to inform, inspire and imagine.



# Inform

Nature Connectedness: What it is, why it matters and how to grow it.

Professor Miles Richardson shared the latest nature connectedness evidence, its benefits for human and environmental wellbeing and, importantly, how it can be improved.

## What is nature connectedness?

There is global recognition that climate warming and the loss of biodiversity show we have a failing relationship with nature. A sustainable future requires a new relationship with nature. Nature connectedness is a psychological and scientific construct that captures our relationship with nature – how we think about, feel about, and experience nature. When we feel very close to nature, we recognise ourselves as part of the natural world, and value our relationship with it. Nature connectedness is much more than visits to and time in nature.

## Why nature connectedness matters

Compared with similar countries, people in the United Kingdom visit nature less and have a weaker connection with nature – across 18 ‘Western’ countries the UK’s level of nature connection was 16th out of 18. This is perhaps no surprise as the UK is one of the most nature depleted countries in the world, and national surveys suggest that, as a nation, we’re not as tuned into nature as we could be. This matters for both the wellbeing of people and the planet.

The volume of research into nature connectedness has grown rapidly over the past decade and there is now a solid body of evidence from dozens of studies that have shown having a strong sense of connection to nature helps people feel good and function well. As well as being good for people, improving nature connection is good for nature too. Having a strong sense of nature connection has an impact on how we treat nature. When people have a closer relationship with nature, they are more inclined to want to help nature and take action to protect it. Dozens of studies have shown a clear and causal relationship between nature connection and carbon cutting pro-environmental behaviours. The same link has been found for pro-nature conservation behaviours – those which aim to protect wildlife and fight against decreasing biodiversity.

The science of nature connection shows us that we can unite the wellbeing of people and nature. Helping people to connect with nature can bring about real change to their lives and the future of the environment.

## Headlines from the latest research

New nature connectedness research is emerging rapidly. A selection of recent research was highlighted at the event, including a batch confirming that addressing the failing human-nature relationship must get beyond increasing access and visits to nature. A [recent systematic review](#) covering 832 independent studies provides an important summary on why the contact and connection difference matters and the necessity to focus on psychological nature connection for a sustainable future. Further recent work [published in People and Nature](#) found more evidence on the benefit of nature connectedness for mental health and the need to move beyond access and excursions into nature towards engagement with nearby



nature. Similarly, recent research that studied exposure to nature and connection with nature in tandem, confirmed that greater nature connection is linked to improved well-being, whereas local green space did not significantly predict mental health outcomes. One possible explanation for this can be found in another recent study in which less connected people stated that simply providing greater access to nature would not increase their nature engagement – but we’ve seen that engagement with nature is crucial for building the close relationship that brings improved wellbeing and pro-nature behaviours.

The latest research also confirms that there has been a decline in human connection to nature over time and macro-factors such as land-use, biodiversity, urbanisation and technology are linked to individual’s nature connection. Such work confirms that the human-nature relationship is crucial for a sustainable future and that policy makers should focus efforts on addressing this failing relationship. However, work published in Conservation Letters showed that priority actions for urban biodiversity conservation identified in the research, such as designing for human–nature connection, are yet to become mainstream in practice.



### How to grow nature connectedness

For individuals, noticing nature, engaging in simple activities with nature, and celebrating the good things in nature are key to developing a stronger connection with nature and the benefits to human and nature’s wellbeing. However, large-scale social and cultural shifts are needed to meet the challenges we face in addressing the climate and wildlife emergencies. The principles of nature connectedness can be applied at a wider scale across the public realm of life to change how people relate to the rest of the natural world. With the focus of many sustainability initiatives being on reduction and restriction, nature connection offers a positive vision of a vibrant and nature-rich world that helps people feel good and live meaningful lives.

Nature Connection in Policy and Practice was an event to imagine the future of our institutions, spaces, and processes: putting nature connection into education's curricula, teaching spaces or practices; designing landscapes, urban spaces, and buildings that provide for and prompt engagement with nature; creating technologies that connect rather than disconnect humans from nature; developing health and social care services that integrate nature connection; or inspiring families, friends and communities to come together to enjoy and nurture nature.

To do this across society requires a systems perspective and considering routes to transformational change. Through taking a systems perspective and combining the 'pathways to nature connectedness' below with a 'leverage points' perspective the pathways to nature connectedness can be applied at the most effective points within systems, for example moving beyond standards, to the information flows, organisational design and goals that exist within the institutions that form our society.



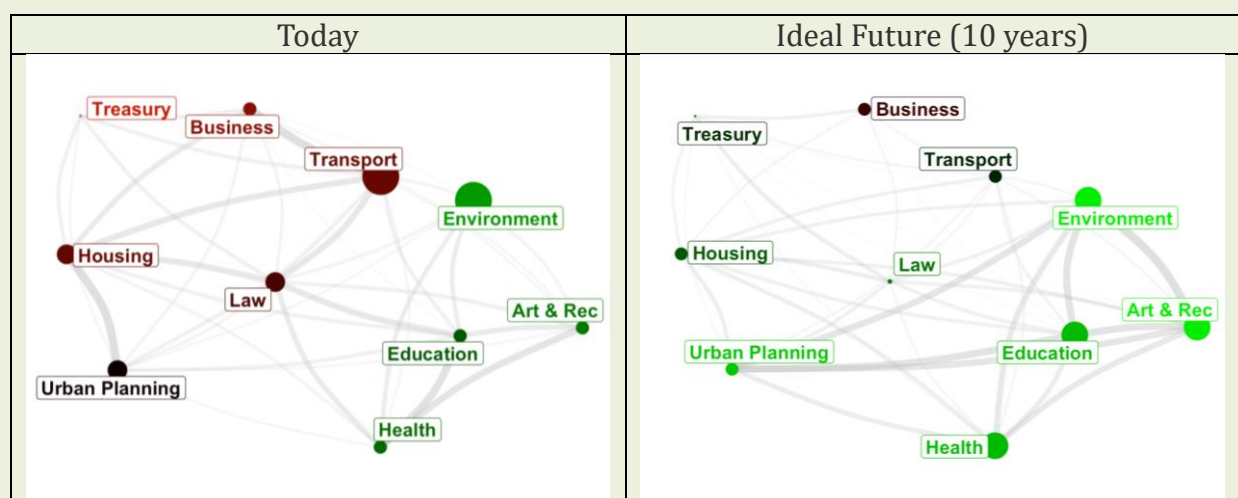
This provides an approach where the pathways can be used to make recommendations across policy areas such as education, health, housing, arts, health and transport. The areas for action in the evidence report for the United Nations General Assembly's Stockholm + 50 meeting draw upon this approach as one route towards redefining and strengthening human-nature connectedness in our social norms.

Transformational change requires the creation of new visions & opportunities for communities to take action, become engaged and updated on their progress. Informed by nature connectedness research and frameworks such as the pathways and leverage points and with suitable inspiration we can imagine a close relationship with nature within a modern technological world and create a vision of a nature connected society.

## Policy Network Activity

Action across a range of policy areas can help improve the human-nature relationship. We asked attendees how they think policy in certain areas works to improve or hinder nature connection by placing the policy areas into one of four categories: positive impact, negative impact, mixed impact, no impact. They did this twice: today and in the future.

In the resulting networks, **larger nodes** are the policy areas that attendees more frequently indicated as affecting nature connectedness, in general. The more **green** the node, the more frequently attendees indicated that policy area had a positive impact on nature connectedness; the more **red** the node, the more frequently it was seen as having a negative impact. The **bands** connecting the nodes indicate how often two policy areas were placed in the same category (i.e., how connected they are); thicker bands mean more connected.



What is most notable about these networks is that, today, the various policy areas are divided (there are clusters of distinctly “harmful” areas and distinctly “helpful” areas). In the ideal future, however, **all** policy areas would be working toward supporting nature connectedness (i.e., there are no pure-red nodes in the ideal future attendees envisioned).

What is also noteworthy is that, today, transportation policy is seen as the largest harm to nature connectedness and environmental policy is seen as the largest help to nature connectedness. In contrast, in the future, transportation policy is imagined to no longer be an active harm to nature connectedness and Arts and Recreation, Education, and Health (joined by Urban Planning) policy are imagined to be equal champions of nature connectedness relative to environmental policy.

Thus, our attendees felt that there was a need to be doing more “good” in all areas of policy, with Arts and Recreation, Education, Health, and Urban Planning perhaps having the most potential improvement toward supporting nature connectedness. These visions also imply that we must be doing far less “harm” in many areas of policy, especially Business, Transport, and Housing policy (all of which were the major harms identified in the network for “Today”).



# Inspire

Martin Gilchrist, Natural England  
Paul Powlesland, Lawyers for Nature  
Gary Evans, Forest Bathing Institute  
Tamsin Constable, West Yorkshire Combined Authority  
Penelope Chapple, National Trust  
Phoebe Tickell, Moral Imaginations  
Jemma Sharman, Natural England

Attendees heard from speakers representing a range of sectors sharing examples of transforming nature connection research into policy and practice, in a series of eight-minute long 'lightening talks'. Martin Gilchrist described how Natural England work with the government and individuals and groups across the United Kingdom to help connect people with nature. Paul Powlesland from Lawyers for Nature argued for the need for legal recognition of nature's rights and described how nature has been given a voice in initiatives in the UK and overseas.



Gary Evans shared how the Forest Bathing Institute is bringing nature connectedness to individuals and groups and contributes to green social prescribing schemes and a new model for health care. Tamsin Constable outlined how nature connectedness was embedded into the West Yorkshire Combined Authority's local nature recovery scheme. Penelope Chapple shared examples of ways the National Trust have been encouraging and inspiring visitors to connect with nature, through nature trails, arts, infrastructure, and pledges.



Phoebe Tickell from Moral Imaginations outlined the three pillars of the moral imagining framework (future generations, more-than-human world, and ancestors) and described their use of this in work with Camden Council and shifting relationships with the River Roding. Jemma Sharman from Natural England described the development of a tool designed to help local government address health, wellbeing, nature and sustainability needs, and the Green Minds nature-connected placemaking project in Plymouth.





The talks illustrated the various and creative ways in which organisations are supporting closer relationships with nature, with change at the level of the individual through to institutional processes and structures.

Overarching themes included the power of community and collaboration, of hearing nature's voice, and of providing conditions that encourage sensory and meaningful engagement with nature. Shifting perspectives, hearts, and minds are the foundation for forging stronger connections with nature.

Collectively the speakers demonstrated how nature connection has relevance across sectors, with law, policy, the arts, environmental sectors, local government, health, technology, and research all having a role to play in realising the transformations necessary for a new relationship with nature. It was also clear that substantial changes can have small beginnings – one individual or one small organisation has the potential to seed large-scale shifts.

# Imagine

Imagining a nature connected future.  
*Phoebe Tickell, Moral Imaginations*

Phoebe Tickell from Moral Imaginations led participants through an exercise in imagination, to imagine a future with nature connection at the heart of policy. After selecting a card identifying a specific role or policy area (such as urban planner, educator, legislator, business owner, farmer, health and wellbeing, voice of nature, or voice of future generations), participants were asked to imagine they had been transported to the year 2033 and tasked with developing policy. Then, working with their groups, collective visions and manifestos for towns/cities/boroughs/counties and regions were created.

Groups presented their visions and manifestos for nature connected societies, and these are distilled and reflected on in the following narrative summary. Many of the ideas and suggestions were captured in real time by the visual scribe.



# A Nature Connected Society

## Key Vision Themes

The table below captures the recurrent themes that ran through the various visions and manifestos for nature connected societies that were imagined and shared on the day.

Theme	
<b>1.</b>	<p><b>Community Participation and Governance:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shift norms to value actions that benefit nature.</li> <li>• Nature and future generations are given a voice in decision-making processes.</li> <li>• Cooperative ownership, stewardship and new urban commons.</li> </ul>
<b>2.</b>	<p><b>Sustainable Economy and Natural Credits:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate nature into the financial system and reward actions that benefit nature.</li> <li>• Establish a circular biodiversity and well-being economy with indicators of nature connection, human and nature's wellbeing.</li> <li>• A biodiversity pegged currency (e.g., "green pound" or "Natcoin") linking nature's recovery to the prosperity of all</li> <li>• Stock-market trading in nature improvement bonds.</li> </ul>
<b>3.</b>	<p><b>Infrastructure and Land Use:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design infrastructure that does not encroach on nature's space.</li> <li>• Nature based regeneration, repurposing outdated infrastructure to engage people with a vibrant natural environment.</li> <li>• People have a closer connection to their food, both in terms of food miles and natural ingredients</li> <li>• New housing developments have common spaces for growing food and nature.</li> </ul>
<b>4.</b>	<p><b>Nature Integration into Daily Life and Education:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep nature present in everyday life.</li> <li>• Utilise technology for feedback on the local nature community and wildlife.</li> <li>• More places to notice and care for nature.</li> <li>• Implement sustainability as an educational goal and a nature-based curriculum in schools, fostering caring relationships with the natural world.</li> </ul>
<b>5.</b>	<p><b>Social Values and Corporate Responsibility:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish guardians who advocate for nature's well-being.</li> <li>• Advertising levy to fund keeping nature present in people's lives.</li> <li>• Collective celebrations of nature, and celebrations of culturally diverse nature connections.</li> <li>• Corporations act as stewards of the environment, moving from punishment for harm done to restoration and repair.</li> <li>• Prioritise the protection, restoration, and repair of nature through legislation and legal duties.</li> <li>• Nature represented on the board.</li> </ul>



## A Narrative Vision of a Nature Connected Society

Change starts with a vision. The themes of the visions and manifestos for nature connected societies are distilled and reflected in the following narrative summary.



In the future, society has undergone a transformative shift, placing nature at the forefront of its values and actions. Norms have changed, and actions that benefit nature are now highly valued. In a nature-connected society natural credits are integrated alongside the financial system. This innovative approach rewards individuals who contribute to nature's well-being, offering incentives in exchange for helping nature. This system works hand in hand with the economy, promoting actions that benefit both society and the environment. Biodiversity becomes a cornerstone of the currency, with concepts like the "green pound" or "Natcoin" linking nature's recovery to the prosperity of all.

Nature itself is given a voice, with its interests and needs taken into consideration in decision-making processes. To support these transformative changes, legislative measures prioritise nature's protection, restoration, and voice, with future generations given legal recognition and protection. Participatory democracy governs decision-making processes, ensuring that citizens have a voice in shaping policies that impact nature. Arts and culture emphasis the celebration of the relationship with nature, promoting diverse cultural community engagement with nature.

The vision for this future nature-connected society extends across various aspects of life. People have a closer connection to their food, both in terms of food miles and natural ingredients. Efforts are made to keep nature present in everyday life, leveraging technology for feedback and interaction with local wildlife. The society actively encourages a connection with nature from an early age, ensuring that future generations grow up with a deep appreciation for the natural world. Children and schools play a crucial role in this vision, with nature education deeply ingrained in the curriculum.

Legal frameworks prioritise integrating nature into the built and urban environment. Land use is transformed, incorporating more common spaces that integrate nature's restoration and local food production close to housing developments. Nature based regeneration is common, repurposing outdated infrastructure to engage people with a vibrant natural environment. Infrastructure development prioritises preserving nature's space, with innovative urban planning techniques that minimize encroachment into natural areas. Space is deliberately set aside for nature, allowing it to thrive.

Overall, this vision of a nature-connected society envisions a harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural world. It emphasizes collective responsibility, well-being, and a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all living beings. By valuing and nurturing nature, this society paves the way for a sustainable and thriving future for generations to come.

## Conclusions

Environment science-policy thinking is starting to push beyond what has gone before to consider improving the human-nature relationship, with progress driven by research evidence. A critical next step in policymaking is the need to mix science, vision, and action. The latest nature connectedness research provides a solid evidence-base that shows the benefits for people and planet of individuals, families, communities, and nations having a closer relationship with nature. It is a firm basis for policy over a range of areas.

Some groups and organisations are starting to demonstrate ways of putting this science into practice across all sectors, from small to large scale initiatives. These actors are adopting nature connectedness science in their application of policy, taking actions that support cultural shifts in people's connection with nature, enacting the interconnectedness of humans and the more-than-human world, and, in some cases, driving policy itself.

Transformational change requires the creation of new visions and opportunities for communities to take action, become engaged and updated on their progress. The vision above provides an initial step. It is one vision distilled from the imaginings of one group. For vision-driven policy, other groups and communities can and should be enabled to share their visions of a new relationship with nature. There is a need for policy being borne and driven from imagination and vision, embodying the hope for a new way of life that helps both people and nature thrive in a harmonious and reciprocal relationship.

The themes of the collective vision cover the range of leverage points introduced during the Inform session and - importantly - go beyond shallower points such as the setting of standards and involve deeper levers such as changing institutional goals, organisational design, and information flows. For example, the provision of feedback loops, such as using technology to keep nature present in everyday life. There are also several themes around the way systems are designed, such as around land use and economy. Finally, some of the themes target the values and goals that provide the greatest leverage, for example, changing the goals for education towards sustainability and nature connection.

Returning to key aspects of transformational change, the themes contain ideas for ways people could become engaged with the vision and take action, including ways to incorporate feedback on progress. Again, others can generate their own actions and opportunities for change.

The essential conclusion from the Silk Mill day is that visions and opportunities for a new relationship with nature can be targeted and made. It is possible to move beyond treating the symptoms of the failing relationship with plans for nature on the one hand, and plans for people on the other, to instead target and restore the human-nature relationship itself.



## **Report Authors**

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