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Businesspeople must reconnect with nature to save the planet

When business leaders form a stronger bond with the natural world, it can benefit their organizations, the environment, and themselves.

George Ferns · April 21, 2022



The business community is doubling down on its commitment to protect the natural environment. Over a fifth of the world's 2,000 largest companies have now committed to net-zero targets. Some have even gone a step further: Bayer, Gucci, Nestlé, and

Starbucks, among others, recently committed to becoming “[nature positive](#).” Strongly encouraged by the [World Economic Forum](#) and the [United Nations](#), nature positivity involves resetting humanity’s relationship with nature by radically improving on issues such as biodiversity, land degradation, and climate change. Being nature positive goes far beyond merely protecting ecosystems or even achieving net-zero targets; the ultimate goal is to create “more nature” by 2030 compared with 2020.

Despite these laudable plans, limited progress is being made to protect the natural environment. Damage to flora and fauna is not slowing down – it’s rapidly increasing. Some argue that business – especially large, profit-seeking companies driven by short-term financial results – are, by design, [not equipped to tackle grand challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss](#). These issues require systemic solutions, long-term thinking, and an overall shift away from our economy’s reliance on fossil fuels.

A Missing Connection to Nature

Yet there may be a deeper, more fundamental reason why business often falls short on improving its relationship with nature: Businesspeople themselves typically lack an intimate connection to nature.

Indeed, businesspeople spend most of their time considered “natural.” Even time spent outside the

office is rarely spent in green spaces; [Americans today spend 92% of their time indoors](#). Even in work environments where business activity does come close to nature – on an oil rig at sea, for instance – there is an implicit sense that humans are somehow “above” nature.

The idea that humans and nature are separate, or that nature is to be dominated by humans, has been perpetuated for centuries. As Christianity spread during the early Middle Ages, the notion that humans are, in essence, animals was rejected by the church as savage. The Enlightenment period further advanced the distinction between *nature* and *human*. Descartes, Newton, Hume, and other Enlightenment thinkers believed that human capacity for reason, science, and order rendered humans clearly superior to “wild” animals. This history has led to the dawn of the [Anthropocene epoch](#), a period where humanity is now regarded as *the* single most influential species on the planet.

But the strict separation between humans and nature is a myth. Darwin’s theory of evolution certainly suggests that we all stem from the same origin. Indeed, despite our intellectual superiority, humans are extremely similar to many of our wild relatives — for instance, [we share 99% of our DNA with chimpanzees](#) (and even [60% with bananas](#)). We are also made from the same molecules, rely on the same Being in harmony instead of in opposition with nature has also been key to our success as a species. Since

Homo sapiens first started migrating across Africa and Eurasia over 200,000 years ago, our ability to survive has depended on having intimate knowledge about the landscapes, animals, and habitats that sustain us. These interactions with nature over long periods have established [humanity's deep emotional bond with nature](#).

This unconscious emotional affiliation underscores why humans are instinctually drawn to nature, fascinated by mountain hikes, the sublime deep blue ocean, and animals at the zoo. Likewise, there is ample scientific data supporting the [positive mental effects of connecting with nature, including reduced stress](#) (notably *technostress*, or the stress experienced by regularly using digital platforms), improved focus and attention, lowered risk of psychiatric disorders, and improved ability to empathize and cooperate.

There is also a significant body of research that [links ecological sustainability and our connection to nature](#). Indeed, when an individual lacks connection to nature, they fail to think of themselves as dependent on, or even part of, nature. This dramatically reduces the likelihood that someone would engage in pro-environmental behavior or be concerned about their role in addressing the ecological crisis.

A similar logic can be applied to business contexts: The larger the distance between businesspeople and nature, whether emotionally or physically, the less value is assigned to protecting nature. This perspective is detrimental to advancing a nature-

positive economy. So, what can businesses do to connect more with nature, and how could such a connection help both nature and business?

1. Connecting with nature provides a deep sense of purpose. Getting outside of our built environments (houses, cars, subways, and office buildings) is the most simple and effective way to connect with nature. Studies suggest that spending time in green spaces promotes an individual's environmental values, which encourages pro-environmental behavior such as recycling and nature conservation. This has significant business implications: Employees who take pro-environment actions, for instance, are more engaged in corporate-level environmental strategies and are therefore more motivated to execute their organization's plans to address environmental issues.

It is not only important to spend time in nature but to *feel* nature. The Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing, utilizes felt senses – not the rational brain – to experience nature on a bodily level. Forest bathers are invited to see the beauty that the natural world has to offer – to pause and find pleasure in sensory perception. Crucially, all emotions are welcome; for instance, individuals sometimes experience a sense of *solastalgia*, a profound sadness or even grief associated with the suffering experienced by the Earth.

Within a business setting, this emotional revelation may give businesspeople a deeper ecological purpose or call them to address critical questions, such as

“Why should I care about the environment?” and “Why does this matter within the context of my work?”

The disconnect between individual employees’ “green” values and their employers’ environmental strategies is a major hurdle for large, publicly listed companies, as former Unilever CEO Paul Polman has suggested. Environmental sustainability may feel somewhat misplaced in daily working life. It is challenging enough to connect to abstract phenomena such as climate change, which for many seems to be a distant global threat rather than a present-day reality. Spending more quality time in nature offers a potential solution, allowing us to truly experience the value of nature, not as a resource to be exploited but as something that has intrinsic meaning for our daily lives, including our work.

2. Nature connects business to place and knowledge. Grounding in nature provides a connection to a specific place. Without this link, businesses may suffer from a situation referred to as placelessness. Placeless businesses are detached from their effects on the natural environment, which is problematic for addressing (or even acknowledging) environmental issues. This affects, for instance, multinational banks, where climate change is merely one element of globalized financial markets. Focusing on these abstracted nonplaces overlooks how businesses are embedded within specific natural systems and locales. Companies far removed from nature can become disconnected from the material

realities of current and pressing environmental issues.

True sustainability occurs when a business is deeply connected to nature and thereby shares a close relationship to place. Consider industries that have endured for centuries, producing regional products such as Champagne (France), whisky (Scotland), Parmesan cheese (Italy), and beer (Germany and Belgium), among many others. These industries have a special relationship to their land; their knowledge of fluctuating climates, changes in flora and fauna, and seasonal patterns is all deeply rooted in nature. For these businesses, sustainability is not an add-on. They have no other choice but to profoundly respect nature. Likewise, there are many studies that focus on the relationship between sustainability and indigenous people, who have successfully managed ecosystems for millennia. In their research on Cree tallymen, or beaver trappers, in northern Quebec, Gail Whiteman and colleagues highlight how managers sustainably oversee fragile ecological systems through the “ecological embeddedness” that occurs when a manager personally identifies with the land and cultivates intricate knowledge about their environment. Such environmental knowledge can be crucial to businesses becoming resilient to climate threats. For instance, studies of the energy industry demonstrate how employees exposed to nature’s harshest conditions – such as extreme weather events at onsite production facilities – take climate issues more seriously compared with employees at corporate offices located in metropolitan cities. Being

exposed to nature “biting back” serves to seriously challenge typical assumptions about ecosystems and scarce resources – which, in turn, produces knowledge about local climates that can be incorporated into decision-making.

3. Nature fosters our interconnectedness. Being connected to nature often results in profound realizations of the interdependency between all living things. This interconnectedness between all matter – or in business-speak, between all “stakeholders” – is central to the concept of sustainability, highlighted by concepts such as [deep ecology](#) or [biocentrism](#). These philosophies stress that no life form is intrinsically worth more or less than any other; human activity is part of natural systems, not a dominant force above other systemic parts (including other humans). Yet, intellectually understanding the idea of interdependency between all things is very different from embodying it, which is essential for a businessperson to act interdependently.

To truly experience a sense of oneness, an individual must connect with nature on a deep level. This can be achieved by, for instance, going on a [yatra – an ancient practice of walking through nature](#), often in part of a wide web of earthly entities, we see both human and nonhuman beings as having inherent value in and of themselves.

A sense of interconnectedness can also be achieved not by going out into nature but by [bringing nature inside](#), with corporate offices designed around or

based on the principles of nature. [Biophilic design](#), for instance, highlights how offices can be constructed within natural habitats: building with natural materials, such as wood and earth; cultivating beehives and community gardens on rooftops; and allowing the natural flow of water and air inside, among other possibilities. Embedding natural features in work environments helps office workers connect with nature, which may further a sense of interconnectedness.

Ultimately, for business to back up its bold claims of seriously tackling the ecological crisis, substantive action will be paramount. However, this can only be achieved if businesspeople and, by extension, the organizations they run, foster a deeper connection with nature. As John Muir, America's most famous naturalist and conservationist, once said, "Keep close to Nature's heart ... and break clear away, once in a while, and climb a mountain or spend time in the woods. Wash your spirit clean."

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