'I can hear the wind and feel it touch me on the nose': The search for agency of the environment in the dialogue between human and nature. The case of Austin, TX

Jacek KOTUS[1]

Abstract

This study explores specific relationships between humans and nature and seeks an extended 'social construction of nature' in the direction of place agency. The research assumes that place can be in agented action and a reciprocal relationship with human and non-human beings. The study's main aim is to identify whether, from the perspective of contemporary city users, a partnership with the biotic and geographical environment is possible both within and outside the city. From this aim arises a research question: Does an inhabitant of a large city realize the possibility of a dialogue involving an 'exchange of meanings' between two entities of interaction that are often highly different (human and non-human beings)? The research uses a questionnaire survey (to recognize general quantitative opinion) and in-depth interviews with selected respondents (to look for deeper explanations). Results show that some urban respondents can see some environmental elements (in and out of the city) as agents and can describe the relationship human-environment in case of a reciprocal action called dialogue.

Keywords: human, place, dialogue, agency, urban dwellers, Austin, TX

Received November 2023, accepted February 2024.

Introduction

In the 2021 Oscar-winning documentary 'My Octopus Teacher', Craig Foster says: "You are in touch with this wild place, and it's speaking to you. Its language is visible". With these words, Foster points out that not only more than human beings, but also the environment is trying to conduct a kind of dialogue with us. Of course, one may say that these words are a metaphor spoken by a documentary filmmaker and a naturalist. Nevertheless, not only film producers or artists notice that the human-oriented narrative of the world is no longer sufficient to explain the complexity of the relationship between human beings and the biotic and geographic environment (Hall, M. 2011; Castree, N. 2014; Peil, T. 2014; Escobar, A. 2019; Adams, P.C. and Kotus, J. 2022).

Nowadays, the social construction of nature (Eder, K. 1996; Demeritt, D. 2022) goes beyond human-centred visions (Stedman, R.C. 2003; Keskitalo, E.C.H. 2023), while recognizing the agency of the biotic and geographical environment is an important part of building interspecies interactions on our planet. As a result of these scientific considerations, in recent decades an approach has been established in social geography in which we are all "living in more-than-human world" (Whatmore, S. 2002, 159; Keskitalo, E.C.H. 2023) and 'more-than-human cities' (Luther, E. 2020; Perrotti, D. 2020). Especially cities and their inhabitants seem to be a very interesting area of research in this area (Acosta, R. *et al.* 2023).

Adapting Beatley's term (Beatley, T. 2016), Escobar posits that "Earth has been

[1] Critical Geography Lab, Faculty of Human Geography and Planning, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Krygowskiego 10, 61-680 Poznań, Poland. E-mails: jacek.tusko@gmail.com, tatra@amu.edu.pl

banished from the city" (Escobar, A. 2019, 132), and consequently draws attention to the essence of the debate about the 're-earthing of our cities'. Urban biotic and geographic environment "afford individuals relaxation, nature enjoyment and an escape from city life. Perhaps the most significant contribution is to the mental well-being of urban residents" (Budruk, M. *et al.* 2009, 825). It is true, nevertheless, above all the biotic and geographic environment of urban settlements is an assemblage of more-than-human beings. A narrative about the biotic and geographical environment as 'a significant other' and 'agent' in relations with humans may be noticed by poets or writers (Thoreau, H.D. 2017; Cavendish, M. 2019), and should be noticed by scholars (Larsen, S.C. and Johnson, J.T. 2013; Wright, S. *et al.* 2016; Escobar, A. 2019), but can it also be noticed by ordinary inhabitants in everyday urban life (Pincetl, S. and Gearin, E. 2005) where human-made structures are dominant and human-oriented thinking is permanent? What arguments are used by proponents and opponents of the thesis of dialogue with the biotic and geographical environment? These questions outline the field of discussion in this article.

The specific aim of the research is to identify whether, from the perspective of the contemporary '*homo urbanus*' (Cribb, J. and Cribb, J. 2017; Carta, M. 2022), a partnership with the biotic and geographical environment is possible both within and outside the city. Does an inhabitant of a large city realize the possibility of a dialogue involving an 'exchange of meanings' between two, often extremely different (human and non-human beings), entities of interaction (Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. 1994; Latour, B. 2014)?

To clarify the issues discussed from the perspective of 'place agency', I present synthetic definitions of basic terms used in the study: *place*, *agency of a place*, *dialogue with place*, and *homo urbanus*. I understand '*a place*' as a real entity consisting of an assemblage of geo-environmental components (parts of rivers, lakes, mountains, forests, or swamps) interacting with non-human beings, humans,

and material elements. The place can act on its rights in the context of an extended understanding of agency. '*The agency of a place*' is an attribute of a place as a non-human being. Agency understood in this way is the ability of a place as a geo-environmental entity to make changes and influence human and non-human beings. The place can be in continually agented action called '*A dialogue with place*.' Such a dialog is a reciprocal conversation between humans (or non-humans) and place. The concept of dialogue is a metaphorical description of the mutual interactions of two self-determining, agented partners (Bohm, D. 1996). In this understanding, dialogue is not an actual conversation but an exchange of meanings between two partners and their transformations under the influence of causative actions. I understand the acceptance of place's agency as the perception of place in dialogue.

A dialogue perceived in this way can be dynamic and short-lived, take place over an extended period, or be a form of bilateral relationship occurring continuously. In such a dialogue, human entities exercise their agency to change the environment, but environmental entities also change us and oppose humans, to some extent teaching us and shaping our attitudes (Larsen, S.C. and Johnson, J.T. 2016). Finally, '*homo urbanus*' is a person permanently connected with the city: living in it (in my research) or visiting it for rest and leisure.

Theoretical background

With the drastically deteriorating state of our planet's biotic and geographical environment, the question of human-nature relationships is being asked by a growing number of scholars. It is one of the core issues of debate in many scientific disciplines (Lorimer, J. and Driessen, C. 2014; Schlottmann, Ch. *et al.* 2017). In the current of geographical debates on nature-human relations, especially in the area of human geography, one can find very different, often extreme, views. This

involves different social perspectives on approaches to nature and the role of humans on earth (Callicott, J.B. 1982; Smith, M.J. 2005; Selin, H. 2013; Basak, S.M. *et al.* 2022), and the views and profiles of different social entities (Frost, W. 2002; Dono, J. *et. al.* 2010; Gifford, R. and Sussman, R. 2012; Selin, H. 2013; Majumder, R. *et al.* 2023). On the one hand, the continuum of discussion is closed by the widely criticized for decades (Correia, D. 2013), very radical and often socially harmful theses referring to the geographical determinism of the 1920s (Huntington, E. 1924; Diamond, J.M. 1999, 2002). On the other hand, there are views that are explicitly human-centred and treat nature functionally and materially (Norgaard, R.B. 2010; Daily, G.C. 2013). In the bracket of these two extreme narratives, we can increasingly find approaches towards human-nature relations that note the symmetrical positions of human and environmental partners, or even environmental agency (Mills, W.J. 1982; Hitchings, R. 2003; Carter, B. and Charles, N. 2013, 2018; Larsen, S.C. and Johnson, J.T. 2013, 2016; Hovorka, A.J. 2018). So far, the most attention has been paid to human-animal relations. Researchers take up various aspects of the issue, from the historical approach (Lorimer, J. and Whatmore, S. 2009) through the relational approach (Lorimer, J. 2010) to the activist approach (Cretan, R. 2015).

In recent decades, the geographical discussion has evolved towards the reciprocal coexistence of humans and various animal species. This results in a redefinition of the geography of animals in favour of the more-than-human beings approach (Hovorka, A.J. 2018). The causative approach to the more-than-human world becomes so cognitively crucial that the environmental debate in this context expands to include subjective interpretations of other bio and geo-environmental partners (Greenhough, B. 2014). Referring to the tradition of indigenous group research, researchers increasingly pay attention to the agented view of, e.g., places (Boldonova, I. 2016; Larsen, S.C. and Johnson, J.T. 2016; Wright, S. *et al.* 2016).

In the context of the dramatic state of our planet, there is no doubt that understanding the depth of the human-nature relationship becomes a very important activity. Researchers working on this issue write that knowledge: 'how people think, talk and write about nature is crucial for understanding the diversity of public perceptions of environmental issues' (Andersen, G. *et al.* 2022).

Social researchers use different approaches and methods to study human-nature contacts. However, irrespective of the adopted concepts or methods, the upper end of the scale of social attitudes is increasingly being extended, moving towards reciprocal and agency-based human-nature relationships. Buijs, A.E. (2009) looks for three components in his interviews with his subjects: values, beliefs, and value orientations, which allow him to construct 'images of nature'. As a result of his research, he formulates five ideal types of images: wilderness image, autonomy image, inclusive image, aesthetic image and functional image. The first two types refer to 'hands-off' attitudes, the last two are anthropocentric attitudes. From the perspective of the topic addressed in this paper, the type separating the four categories mentioned above seems most interesting. 'The inclusive image' is "firmly based in inclusive notions of nature and culture. Nature and culture are interrelated and mutually dependent and all living beings, including humans, are defined as nature" (Buijs, A.E. 2009, 427).

In another study, an international group of researchers (Braito, M.T. *et al.* 2017) formulates three dimensions of human-nature relations and a set of seven social attitude types: master, steward, partner, participant, user, apathy and nature distant guardian. Among the identified social attitudes, we also find distinctly human-oriented types, as well as types that describe a more symmetrical relationship with nature. Speaking in a slightly different vein, the already cited Anderson, G.K. and colleagues (2022) note that the study of the relationship between human and nature provokes the sketching of a vision of the latter as: 'fragile patient' or

'reactive', 'autonomous agent'. In particular, the last two terms draw attention to a situation in which the biotic and geographical environment of our planet and human live in one more-than-human world. This line of debate is directly inspired by the research of Larsen, S.C. and Johnson, J.T. (2016, 1), who claim that "place and self are co-constituted" and that "place speaks, creates and teaches" us as humans.

It is this way of narrating the biotic and geographical environment that became the starting point of the research, the results of which I present in this paper. If we assume that the scale of social attitudes towards nature extends between 'user' and 'partner', the presented results of quantitative and qualitative research attempt to explore and concretize the essence of the human-nature partnership reduced to a mutual exchange of meanings. An exchange that takes the form of a dialogue or conversation.

Methodology

The research consisted of two phases, both realized in Austin, TX. In the first research activity I conducted a survey in which I asked people living in Austin the question "Is dialogue with non-human beings or objects possible? In this case, dialogue is understood as a kind of exchange of meanings between symmetrically understood partners?" This was a closed question in which respondents were asked to refer to 10 possible dialogue entities. Each time they answered yes or no to the question. A survey questionnaire was completed by 302 adults[2].

Each time, I personally interacted with the respondent and provided them with a QR code that redirected them to the SurveyMonkey website. On this portal, respondents filled in the survey questionnaire digitally, virtually 100 per cent using their smartphone. Out of nearly a thousand QR codes distributed using this method redirecting to the survey at SurveyMonkey, I received 302 returns.

In the second phase, I selected 20 citizens of Austin, TX *(Table 1)* for in-depth interviews from among those who participated in the first phase and agreed to take part in a further study[3].

The scenario for in-depth interviews involved asking one initial question around which the subsequent conversation developed. The question was 'for what reasons do you imagine that a symmetrical exchange of meaning between you, as a human, and nature is possible or are you convinced that such a dialogue is impossible?'. Respondents could choose to meet face to face or via Zoom communications platform. In the text of the article, selected anonymized excerpts from the statements of coded respondents are presented. In one case, a third person participated in the interview, in addition to the respondent. This was the respondent's partner, who also spoke from time to time during the interview. Her contribution was used in the analysis and presentation of the citations. Naturally, with the consent of the concerned parties. After conducting 20 interviews, I concluded that the interviews had exhausted the question and, in accordance with the principles of qualitative research methodology, I did not select any more respondents (Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. 1985; Sandelowski, M. 1995; Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N. 2019).

[2] Structure of research group N = 302. By gender: *female 54.21%, male 45.79%, transgender 0.66%, non-binary/ non-conforming 0,99%, prefer not to respond 2.98%. By age: 18–24 15.23%, 24–34 22.85%, 35–45 25.83%, 46–55 18.21%, 56–65 9.60%, 66–75 4.30%, over 75 0.99%, prefer not to respond 2.98%. By education: nursery school to 8th grade 0.33%, some high school 8.61%, bachelor's degree 44.04%, master's degree 29.14%, doctorate degree 10.93% prefer not to respond 6.95%.*

[3] All participants of the study are protected by the code of ethics of scientific research due to rules of project UMO-2018/31/B/HS4/00059. Each participant could withdraw from the study at any stage. The participants are anonymous; after the recording of the conversation, an anonymous transcription was made, and the recordings were permanently destroyed.

Table 1. Encoded profiles of study participants

Code/ Person	Age	Gender	Self-declaration of mindset/ thinking	Short answers to the question about human - environment dialogue
P1	47	Female	artistic/humanistic mindset	yes
P2	53	Female	artistic/humanistic mindset	yes
P3	35	Female	scientific mindset	yes
P4	63	Female	artistic/humanistic mindset	yes
P5	32	Female	–	yes
P6	34	Male	scientific mindset	no
P7	35	Female	artistic/humanistic mindset	yes
P8	42	Female	–	yes
P9	52	Female	artistic/humanistic mindset	yes
P10	28	Female	scientific mindset	no
P11	17	Male	scientific mindset	no
P12	29	Female	scientific mindset	no
P13	40	Female	scientific mindset	no
P14	32	Female	artistic/humanistic mindset	yes
P15	34	Female	artistic/humanistic mindset	yes
P16*	58	Male	scientific mindset	Detailed answer**
P17	35	Male	scientific mindset	Detailed answer**
P18	52	Female	scientific mindset	no
P19	35	Male	scientific mindset	yes
P20	40	Male	scientific mindset	no

*Partnership, the partner actively participated in the conversation. **I start to think about dialogue at the end of that interview. *Source*: Author's own research.

The role of nature in the city (not only): Is dialogue with non-human beings possible and how it might proceed?

With whom human can have a dialogue?

Looking at the answers given by the respondents of the quantity survey *(Figure 1)* it can be seen that:

– among the surveyed Austin residents, there is a great deal of empathy and understanding for animals as entities that can dialogue with humans in a partnership exchange of meaning;

– among the surveyed Austin residents, there is a sizeable – close to 50 percent – realization that environmental entities such as rivers, forces of nature, sand dunes and plants can be partners in dialogue with human;

– according to the respondents, among the material entities of dialogue, only AI is a comparably important dialogue partner similar to environmental entities;

– the rating of the individual environmental partners that make up the bio-environment and the geo-environment are correlated *(Table 2)*, as are the ratings of the material entities that make up the world of matter (including the digital world). In contrast, there is no clearly significant correlation between the two sets.

It can be argued that the social construction of nature from the perspective of the surveyed residents of the Texas capital takes into account attitudes of dialogue (understood as an exchange of meanings) between bio-environmental and geo-environmental partners. With only the position of animals in the social assessment of the possibilities for mutual dialogue being very pronounced and differing in the ratings from the other assessed partners.

I decided to seek the answer to this question about the social arguments 'for' or 'against' through in-depth interviews with selected respondents.
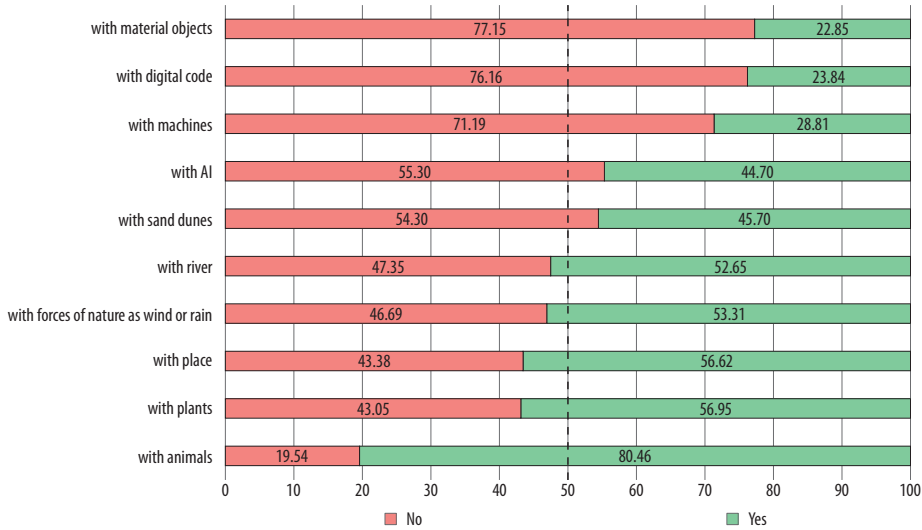
Fig. 1. Dialogue as a kind of exchange of meanings between symmetrically understood partners, in percent (N = 308). *Source*: Author's own elaboration.

Views of surveyed city dwellers on the possibility of dialogue with the biotic and geographical environment: an in-depth look at the nature of the relationship

At the outset, it should be noted that for all my interviewees, the environment, both inside and outside the city, is important. Each interviewee considered the biotic and geographical environment to be a necessary world for life and spoke with concern about its state. Many expressed their fascination with what nature in and out of the city can offer human during their encounters. Many of my respondents, even those very sceptical about dialogue with environmental partners, owned a dog or cat.

During each conversation, the question was asked about my interviewees' favourite places in Austin. In most cases, respondents indicated natural areas, describing their positive experiences in Buttercup Creek Forest, Batron Creek or more centrally-located parks such as Zilker or Mayfield Park and Natural Reserve. My interviewees were particularly impressed by the animals they encountered in these places. One interlocutor said:

'Once we were walking with my entire family when we heard a sound of cracking sticks and we froze in place to start to listen where that sound was coming from and we found a fox, a mama fox that was building some sort of little hatch. We were not sure why it was doing it, until we realized it had two little baby foxes. So, it was building some sort of little hatch for their family. It was amazing.' (P_20_40_M)

During the in-depth interviews, I did not doubt for a moment that the respondents had positive references to nature. And yet, the question about the possibility of dialogue with environmental entities aroused a lot of emotion and provoked different thoughts and answers.

Skeptical views: The biotic and geographical environment cannot be the entity of dialogue

Nearly half of the 20 interviewees said that nature above all was relaxation and they found it difficult to imagine having any dialogue with it, apart from the relationship with animals. One interviewee noted:

'I don't expect inspiration from an urban natural place. Such places are for me to forget, to calm down,

Table 2. Cross-correlation of correlation of the evaluations of the different types of dialogue*

N = 302	Animals	Plants	Place	Natural forces: wind, rain	River	Sand dunes	Machines	Material objects	AI	Digital code
Animals	1.00000	0.49931	0.41130	0.34239	0.40249	0.38494	0.20279	0.18857	0.27505	0.17769
Plants	0.49931	1.00000	0.68291	0.63409	0.70242	0.69009	0.27245	0.37753	0.21672	0.25100
Place	0.41130	0.68291	1.00000	0.70761	0.68206	0.68217	0.36497	0.46039	0.16878	0.25451
Natural forces: wind, rain	0.34239	0.63409	0.70761	1.00000	0.82728	0.76518	0.37546	0.44603	0.18728	0.28996
River	0.40249	0.70242	0.68206	0.82728	1.00000	0.84330	0.39825	0.46869	0.18572	0.29715
Sand dunes	0.38494	0.69009	0.68217	0.76518	0.84330	1.00000	0.44393	0.43491	0.23144	0.29794
Machines	0.20279	0.27245	0.36497	0.37546	0.39825	0.44393	1.00000	0.69873	0.53103	0.57068
Material objects	0.18857	0.37753	0.46039	0.44603	0.46869	0.43491	0.69873	1.00000	0.38317	0.54692
AI	0.27505	0.21672	0.16878	0.18728	0.18572	0.23144	0.53103	0.38317	1.00000	0.55977
Digital code	0.17769	0.25100	0.25451	0.28996	0.29715	0.29794	0.57068	0.54692	0.55977	1.00000

*p < 0,05. Source: Author's own research.

not to talk. Places are passive and this works the other way around [from place dialogue] in my opinion. In a place such as a park, I don't need to have any conversation, dialogue. I don't think about being part of nature, about being in some kind of symbiosis. I rather use nature to relax, to calm down. I can't imagine talking with a place, plants or river. The only exception here are animals like dogs or cats. Place is constant, unchanging and that gives me security. But whether it's dialogue and the place says something, I don't know. This is just my perception of it. A very subjective situation.' (P13_41_F)

Another respondent spoke in a similar vein:

'I go there (to the park) just to relax, most of the time I go there in the mornings, before I start my day, so it's a good way to kind of put me in a good mood to start the day. I just go with an open mind, to see what I find, I'm not looking for anything particular and those are the best ones. Because then the unexpected happens.' (P_20_40_M)

In both of the interviews referenced, respondents emphasized that they viewed urban natural areas in Austin as places with a specific function. For them, nature is an important component of the city space, but it has its utilitarian function of recreation, rest and relaxation.

Another interviewee speaks even more unfavourably about the dialogue with nature and its constituent entities:

'Place or other living organisms can distract me. So maybe they can also talk. But I rather doubt that this is a dialogue. The bustling places, e.g., the 6th Street in Austin, are loud, bustling, lots of people, ads, smells and sounds. I can't focus my thoughts there and I can't see the dialogue with myself or the place at all over there. My mind is busy with other stimuli and recognizing them, defining them. Though maybe it is on the 6th Street that the place talks to me – it sends me many signals and I compare them, respond with behaviour, choices, and look for confirmation of those choices in other information from the place. For me in nature there is no clarity of message to which I can respond and interact.' (P6_34_M)

The man allows for the possibility of an interactional relationship with the built environment. According to him, these types of places are overflowing with messages and even provoke an interactional relationship. He himself says he likes to listen to birds singing or the sound of trees or a flowing

stream, but for him it is a kind of intoxicating sound through which he can immerse himself in his thoughts:

'Maybe because I'm a stricter and analytical person, I don't see it on the basis that a place is talking to me. It seems to me more that in such quiet places, with nature, with environment, I am able more to have some kind of dialogue with myself. An internal one.' (P6_34_M)

For him, dialogue with place is the 'poetic naming' of a functional relationship with nature in the space of the city, in which, as he says:

'I can sit back, relax and I can have some thoughts.' (P6_34_M)

A young high school interviewee also responds negatively to the question about opportunities for dialogue with bio-environmental and geo-environmental partners. Interestingly, this respondent recalls his childhood experience saying:

'When I was a little kid, I imagined the place was alive. I explored every place in my neighbourhood at that time. It was something unknown and I was kind of opening another door and getting to know this place. This could be such a dialogue. When I was little, I always wanted to climb every hill and see what there was. But can you actually talk to the place or more, to the environment? I don't think so. I can imagine that kind relations to animals but not for other elements.' (P11_17_M)

In the autobiographical view, the respondent points out that he remembers this type of environmental relationship from his childhood. By getting to know his neighbourhood and areas further away, he was able to feel an interactional relationship. However, he believes this was the result of a childhood imagination that he lost as he grew older.

Evolving views: it is rather difficult to imagine a dialogue between environment and human, although...

During my interviews, many of those interviewed stressed that the topic of dialogue with nature, understood as many different entities, from animals and plants to places and the geographical environment: dunes, rivers or forces of nature, compelled deeper reflection. In two cases, respondents themselves began to change their minds about dialogue with biotic and geographical environmental entities during the interviews.

There was an interesting conversation with a former marine and keen hunter. This was the only interview involving a third party – the respondent's partner. This person declared himself from the beginning to be a sceptic for some kind of in-depth, reciprocal relationship between the entities of nature and himself. The respondent expressed his concern for the environment, but he said:

'I'm probably not that deep. I'm more of a 'black and white' type of human. I look at the sky in my city and think it will rain, there will be a storm, the weather will change. I need to hide from the rain. When I'm at the ocean and I see huge waves I think 'this is not a good time to swim'. I'm sure it's no dialogue. It is rather my knowledge. When hunting, I have to watch nature. I have to listen to the silence, pay attention to the signals. To react to what I notice. I don't call it a conversation or a dialogue. But yes, as I track game, the place tells me a lot. But I wouldn't call it a dialogue. I recognize the signals. These are feelings and knowledge rather than a conversation. It's the same in the city. I pay attention to certain signals and draw conclusions.' (P16_58_M)

The sentences about the signals sent by the environment and how to read them provoked me to develop this thread. In his story, the interviewee identifies a relationship between himself and the environment based on mutual signals:

'Yes, more than anything you just listen to. I've been in deer stands and you stood there, it's very quiet and you are waiting for something to change and I don't call it a dialogue, maybe it's the same thing, I just call it; you're just listening with all your senses, more with ears than anything.'

Although he is not sure whether this type of relationship can be called a dialogue. It is, according to the respondent, the ability to recognize certain signs in the environment. At this point, my interviewee's partner took the floor

and tried to look at the story from the perspective of dialogue or conversation by saying:

'It is dialogue, because you are waiting for some signal, something and then if you see or hear something, then you change and respond to that. Unfortunately, your final answer is hunting them.' (woman participate in that IDI)

To which the respondent replied:

'Sometimes no. Sometimes the animal was too close or did something. I kicked him and I said, you win. So, it was like you have an agreement with nature maybe. It's like okay, I get my shot and missed and you're free, kind of like a dialogue with an animal rather than with nature, or animal-nature. So maybe you're right - this is an invisible conversation. I need to think more about this.'

The second respondent who went through an evolution of his views during the interview also started with a declaration of nature worship and no chance of any dialogue with place, wind or river:

'A very difficult question and one answer comes to my mind - no. I find it hard to imagine how a place, river or wind can have a dialogue with a person. I love nature and have been involved with it since childhood. I don't like anything about the city. If I have to say whether people and places can have a dialogue in the city, then I strongly say no. In cities I like parks, especially the wild ones. I'm happy when I see a turtle, a heron. But is it actually dialogue with place or another element of the natural world? It's hard for me to imagine. I need green places and I go to the park to satisfy it. Nature makes an impression on me.' (P17_35_M)

The same respondent also doubts a dialogue between human and nature and wild environment, outside the city:

'Every person perceives a place differently and it is very subjective. If one place can say something different to everyone, does that mean it speaks different dialogues, is in different dialogues? It's hard for me to imagine.'

Although, when asked further about his experience of diverse relationships with the environment, he begins to cite examples that are nowhere near as clear-cut as his skeptical declarations:

'Hm... once when I drove through the desert in Arizona, I had an impression of the vastness of space, the great impact of physical spatiality on my mind. Huge reserves of empty space. I might even call it a mystical experience. And there are a lot of these grand-scale places here in the States that make impressions on people. But is it a dialogue? Perhaps it is indeed an encounter with nature - dialogue with some natural forces or beings. I'm driving and suddenly I have to react, think about something else. Something tells me to react. It is an interesting and amazing conclusion for me'.

Both respondents also declared themselves to have scientific mindset. However, in the course of the conversations they had with themselves, they noticed that they were becoming convinced of a different point of view. Perhaps they did not even change their minds about their relationship to the environment or their perception of the environment as much as they began to look deeper, differently at the environment itself. Above all, on a diverse entity, made up of different entities. Secondly, the entity self-determines and compels them to respond as people.

Approval views: nature can be and is a biotic and geographical dialogue partner

Slightly more than half of my interviewees agreed from the outset that dialogue with nature or its biological and geographical components is not only possible, but takes place continuously and independently of us humans. In their stories, they highlighted specific examples where they see such dialogue and, somewhat contrary to my expectations, these were not examples focusing on the relationship with animals. One respondent said:

'When I am at the seaside I always have to go into the water, even if only for a moment. When I leave, I have to come to the seaside and say goodbye. If I stand on wet sand, I can feel the waves hitting my legs with varying degrees of intensity. I feel a living planet. And in this place, there can actually be a dialogue, and a materialized, concrete one at that. Maybe it's because you feel the immediate reaction of the water in this case, the water splashing, pushing. In built places, in the city? I think it's more difficult here.' (P8 42_F)

The respondent actually chose a very dynamic example that vividly illustrates the point of dialogue with the biotic and geographical environment. It is not about conversation or the communicative exchanges of ideas we know from social interaction. In the case of the respondent's relationship, the dialogue with the sea or with the place takes place as an exchange of meanings and agency between the two subjects of the relationship.

Some respondents made the dialogue relationship with environmental entities dependent on the characteristics of the human partner. The respondents pointed out that the perception of dialogue depends on the sensitivity, the perception of the world, the personality of the person, but also on the demographic or social profiles of the person, e.g., where they live or grew up. One respondent excerpted it this way:

'It depends on the sensitivity of the person – to being able to talk to a place. If you spend a lot of time in nature you can read it and you penetrate those first layers. And then I can imagine the dialogue. I see a partner and I understand it. It's probably similar in the city. I think that reminds me of how the level of your relationship with nature has to do with how much time you spend in it. And if you live in a city, where you are not able to do that as much, then it's harder to develop that without ever experiencing it. You have people that maybe grow up in a way where they are really good at tracking and watching signs in nature for what has happened, what animals were just through here and they have a deeper sense of communicating with nature and understanding their surroundings. I guess that's what it means to me.' (15_34_F)

Naturally, the term 'dialogue with nature' is a certain semantic simplification. The essence is the range of meaning behind the phrase and the kind of partnership with the environment and the recognition of its self-determining qualities. One respondent did not talk about dialogue but interaction:

'I guess between me and environment is kind of interaction. I feel welcomed and my interaction with the area depending on which park or which section of the park I am at, or who is with me, might determine which area I am going to go and enjoy. If it's raining and I'm out there with the dogs, we tear a path up because it's just mud and we walk around, if there's animals out, you can interact with them, I don't know if that's a dialogue with environment, place, plants, but there's deer and it can be dialogue with this animal. So, dogs can chase the deer, go around and stuff.' (P19_35_M)

The mechanism of the processes behind these terms converge. It is a kind of agency-based activity of the partner that forces a reflection or even a conscious change in behaviour, views and attitudes. One respondent explicitly calls this an 'exchange of meanings':

'Since we are talking about Barton Springs and just having a day there when the weather is nice, everything is going well, just being thankful or having a sense of thanks towards the weather, experience, the atmosphere, and surroundings. To me, that's kind of like having a conversation with the environment. The appreciation of it, acknowledging it when you are still within the experience, not later on. I can see how, translation wise, it can be a little bit difficult. Maybe the conversation is not the right words but an exchange of meanings or being in touch with nature.' (P18_52 _F)

One respondent recounts how her dialogue with the natural environment in the city takes place:

'In the city, the water talks to me, like another person. Water makes different sounds, and they are a representation of the state of the environment. (P7_35_F).

Conclusions

I wondered whether residents of a large city are able to think of the biotic and geographical environment as active partners in dialogue. The completed survey revealed surprisingly positive public attitudes towards animals (Basak, S.M. *et. al.* 2022). I must honestly admit that, knowing the reality of what has been happening for decades, the extermination of more animal species and the destruction of the environment on our planet, I feared that the opinions and views of the respondents would not be so positive. When evaluating the human-animal conver-

sational relationship, respondents clearly declare the possibility of dialogue understood as a symmetrical exchange of meanings between different beings. The number of positive indications, accepting environmental dialogue with partners other than animals, is lower, but still surprisingly positive (Anderson, G.K. *et al.* 2022). In my opinion, the respondents' positive attitude towards interpreting the relationship with environmental entities such as animals, but also rivers, plants, forces of nature or sand dunes as a dialogue is a very important signal of a change in human thinking about the environment (Buijs, A.E. 2009; Beatley, T. 2016; Braito, M.T. *et al.* 2017; Escobar, A. 2019).

Perhaps such positive opinions and attitudes are related to the fact that the survey was conducted among residents of Austin, TX. The residents of Texas' capital city are regarded as a pro-environment community, and they emphasized this very often in private conversations with me during my research stay. The city itself was ranked very high, 10th in 2020, in the 'Most Dog-Friendly Cities in America'[4]. In this respect, the 'city-dweller-nature' environmental relations study carried out in Austin can be linked to the identification of pro-environmental attitudes among a very mature community. Nevertheless, the answers to the posed question can still be interpreted in the context of the ability of contemporary 'homo urbanus' to build conversational relationships with environmental entities.

The general questionnaire survey was deepened in interviews. From the interviews, it appears that a very important factor shaping the views held by my interviewees towards the human-nature relationship is a certain subjective level of empathy towards the environment. Supporters of the human-nature dialogue thesis point out that they have an artistic, humanistic and emotionally sensitive personality. They are able to look at the environment around them outside the usual patterns and express these emotions in conversation. They have a kind of in-depth reflection on the biotic and geographical environment. At the same time, they very rationally point to those situations or events that can testify to the reality of human-nature dialogue, e.g., contact with sea waves or observation of vegetation over time.

Very often, opponents of a peer and conversational view of the environment say that park areas are areas of relaxation and recreation for them. They do not look at urban green spaces as an accumulation of living biological organisms and subject to the processes of natural forces, but as a functional design created by human for human.

One of the younger interviewees indicated that as a child he was able to imagine a dialogue with a place or environment. Now, however, years later, he looks at it differently. This may suggest that in the process of education and socialization, instead of developing our competences of respecting other entities that make up the more-than-human world, we lose these skills and acquire beliefs specific to the Western World. We become human-oriented beings in the social process and we have lost awareness that we live among other living beings and geo-environmental entities.

Summarizing the considerations and findings in this paper, it can be concluded that our planet – the Earth – is a living organism. It is not just a metaphor, but a fact based on biological, geographical, chemical and physical evidence. This living organism co-creates a network of agency-centred links between different biotic and geographical entities. One of them is that the human species is shaped and equipped in this way, not in any other way. Recognizing that we are immersed in nature and co-creating (or destroying) it. It's a matter of being socially open to the environment and redefining its narrative by ourselves. In my opinion, changing the perception of non-human nature is the first step to understanding that other bio and geo-environmental entities can have their own agency in action.

---

[4] https://smartasset.com/mortgage/most-dog-friendly-cities-in-america-2020

Study limitations

In-depth interviews were intended to clarify the opinions contained in the questionnaire survey. Quality research on a larger scale should consider differences in gender, age, and education and be with representatives of different geographical regions, cultures, and ethnic origins. However, large-scale qualitative research is expensive and requires a large team of researchers or a long-time approach. My research includes residents of the capitol of the Texas. They are instead a voice in the discussion rather than evidence confirming particular hypotheses.

REFERENCES

Acosta, R., Adedeji, J.A., Barua, M., Gandy, M., Gora, L.S. and Schlichting, K.M. 2023. Thinking with urban natures. *Global Environment* 16. (2): 177–121. https://doi.org/10.3197/ge.2023.160202

Adams, P.C. and Kotus, J. 2022. Place dialogue. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 47. (4): 1090–1103. https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12554

Andersen, G., Fløttum, K., Carbou, G. and Gjesdal, A.M. 2022. People's conceptions and valuations of nature in the context of climate change. *Environmental Values* 31. (4): 397–420. https://doi.org/10.3197/096327121X16328186623850

Basak, S.M., Hossain, M.S., O'Mahony, D.T., Okarma, H., Widera, E. and Wierzbowska, I.A. 2022. Public perceptions and attitudes toward urban wildlife encounters – A decade of change. *Science of the Total Environment* 834. 155603. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.155603

Beatley, T. 2016. *Handbook of Biophilic City Planning and Design*. Washington, Island Press. https://doi.org/10.5822/978-1-61091-621-9

Bohm, D. 1996. *On Dialogue*. London, Routledge.

Boldonova, I. 2016. Environmental hermeneutics: Ethnic and ecological traditions in aesthetic dialogue with nature. *Journal of Landscape Ecology* 9. (1): 22–35. https://doi.org/10.1515/jlecol-2016-0002

Braito, M.T., Böck, K., Flint, C., Muhar, A., Muhar, S. and Penker, M. 2017. Human-nature relationships and linkages to environmental behaviour. *Environmental Values* 26. (3): 365–389. https://doi.org/10.3197/096327117X14913285800706

Budruk, M., Thomas, H. and Tyrrell, T. 2009. Urban green spaces: A study of place attachment and environmental attitudes in India. *Society and Natural Resources* 22. (9): 824–883. https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920802628515

Buijs, A.E. 2009. Lay people's images of nature: Comprehensive frameworks of values, beliefs, and value orientations. *Society and Natural Resources* 22. (5): 417–432. https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920801901335

Callicott, J.B. 1982. Traditional American Indian and Western European attitudes toward nature: An overview. *Environmental Ethics* 4. (4): 293–318. https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics1982443

Carta, M. 2022. *Homo Urbanus*. Rome, Donzelli Editore.

Carter, B. and Charles, N. 2013. Animals, agency and resistance. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 43. (3): 322–340. https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12019

Carter, B. and Charles, N. 2018. The animal challenge to sociology. *European Journal of Social Theory* 21. (1): 79–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431016681305

Castree, N. 2014. *Making Sense of Nature*. New York, Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203503461

Cavendish, M. 2019. Of many worlds in this world. In *Margaret Cavendish*. Ed.: Robbins, M., Kindle Edition, New York, Review Books Poets, 42.

Correia, D. 2013. F**k jared diamond. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 24. (4): 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2013.846490

Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N. 2019. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. London, SAGE.

Cretan, R. 2015. Mapping protests against dog culling in post-communist Romania. *Area* 47. 155–165. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12155

Cribb, J. and Cribb, J. 2017. *The Urbanite (Homo Urbanus). Surviving the 21st Century: Humanity's Ten Great Challenges and How We can Overcome Them.* Berlin, Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-41270-2

Daily, G.C. 2013. Nature's services: societal dependence on natural ecosystems. In *The Future of Nature*. Eds.: Robin, L., Sörlin, S. and Warde, P., New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 454–464. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300188479-039

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. 1994. *What is Philosophy?* New York, Columbia.

Demeritt, D. 2002. What is the 'social construction of nature'? A typology and sympathetic critique. *Progress in Human Geography* 26. (6): 767–790. https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132502ph402oa

Diamond, J.M. 1999. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies.* New York, W.W. Norton & Co.

Diamond, J.M. 2002. Evolution, consequences and future of plant and animal domestication. *Nature* 418. (6898): 700–707. https://doi.org/10.1038/nature01019

Dono, J., Webb, J. and Richardson, B. 2010. The relationship between environmental activism, pro-environmental behaviour and social identity. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 30. (2): 178–186. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2009.11.006

Eder, K. 1996. *The Social Construction of Nature: A Sociology of Ecological Enlightenment.* London, SAGE.

Escobar, A. 2019. Habitability and design: Radical interdependence and the re-earthing of cities. *Geoforum* 101. 132–140. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.02.015

Frost, W. 2002. Did they really hate trees? Attitudes of farmers, tourists and naturalists towards nature in the rainforests of eastern Australia. *Environment and History* 8. (1): 3–19. https://doi.org/10.3197/096734002129342576

Gifford, R. and Sussman, R. 2012. Environmental attitudes. In *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental and Conservation Psychology.* Ed.: Clayton, S.D., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 65–80. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199733026.013.0004

Greenhough, B. 2014. More-than-human geographies. In *The SAGE Handbook of Human Geography.* Eds.: Lee, R. et al., London, SAGE, 94–119. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446247617.n6

Hall, M. 2011. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany.* Albany, NY, SUNY Press.

Hitchings, R. 2003. People, plants and performance: On actor network theory and the material pleasures of the private garden. *Social & Cultural Geography* 4. (1): 99–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/1464936032000049333

Hovorka, A.J. 2018. Animal geographies II: Hybridizing. *Progress in Human Geography* 42. (3): 453–462. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132517699924

Huntington, E. 1924. Geography and natural selection. A preliminary study of the origin and development of racial character. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 14. (1): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/00045602409356890

Keskitalo, E.C.H. 2023. *Rethinking Nature Relations: Beyond Binaries.* London, Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035306336

Larsen, S.C. and Johnson, J.T. 2013. *A Deeper Sense of Place: Stories and Journeys of Collaboration in Indigenous Research.* Corvallis, Oregon State University Press.

Larsen, S.C. and Johnson, J.T. 2016. The agency of place: Toward a more-than-human geographical self. *GeoHumanities* 2. (1): 149–166. https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2016.1157003

Latour, B. 2014. Agency at the time of the Anthropocene. *New Literary History* 45. 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2014.0003

Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry.* London, SAGE. https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8

Lorimer, J. 2010. Elephants as companion species: The lively biogeographies of Asian elephant conservation in Sri Lanka. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35. (4): 491–506. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2010.00395.x

Lorimer, J. and Driessen, C. 2014. Wild experiments at the Oostvaardersplassen: Rethinking environmentalism in the Anthropocene. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39. (2): 169–181. https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12030

Lorimer, J. and Whatmore, S. 2009. After the 'king of beasts': Samuel Baker and the embodied historical geographies of elephant hunting in mid-nineteenth-century Ceylon. *Journal of Historical Geography* 35. (4): 668–689. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2008.11.002

Luther, E. 2020. Between Bios and Philia: Inside the politics of life-loving cities. *Urban Geography* 44. (10): 2080–2097. https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2020.1854530

Majumder, R., Plotkina, D. and Rabeson, L. 2023. Environmentally responsible values, attitudes and behaviours of Indian consumers. *Environmental Values* 32. (4): 433–468. https://doi.org/10.3197/096327122X16611552268645

Mills, W.J. 1982. Metaphorical vision: Changes in Western attitudes to the environment. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 72. (2): 237–253. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1982.tb01822.x

Norgaard, R.B. 2010. Ecosystem services: From eye-opening metaphor to complexity blinder. *Ecological Economics* 69. (6): 1219–1227. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2009.11.009

Peil, T. 2014. The spaces of nature: Introduction. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 96. (1): 37–39. https://doi.org/10.1111/geob.12034

Perrotti, D. 2020. Toward an agentic understanding of the urban metabolism: A landscape theory perspective. *Urban Geography* 43. (1): 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2020.1848760

Pincetl, S. and Gearin, E. 2005. The reinvention of public green space. *Urban Geography* 26. (5): 365–384. https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.26.5.365

Sandelowski, M. 1995. Sample size in qualitative research. *Research in Nursing & Health* 18. 179–183. https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.4770180211

Schlottmann, Ch., Jamieson, D., Jerolmack, C., Rademacher, A. and Damon, M. 2017. *Environment and Society: A Reader.* New York, NY University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ht4vw6

Selin, H. (ed.) 2013. *Nature across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures.* Vol. 4. Berlin, Springer Science & Business Media. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2700-7

Sᴍɪᴛʜ, M.J. 2005. *Thinking through the Environment: A reader*. London, Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203984451

Sᴛᴇᴅᴍᴀɴ, R.C. 2003. Is it really just a social construction? The contribution of the physical environment to sense of place. *Society & Natural Resources* 16. (8): 671–685. https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920309189

Tʜᴏʀᴇᴀᴜ, H.D. 2017. *Walden: Life in the Woods*. Layton, Gibbs Smith. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300128048

Wʜᴀᴛᴍᴏʀᴇ, S. 2002. *Hybrid Geographies: Natures, Cultures, Spaces*. Newbury Park, SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446219713

Wʀɪɢʜᴛ, S. Suchet-Pearson, S., Lʟᴏʏᴅ, K., Bᴜʀᴀʀʀᴡᴀɴɢᴀ, L., Gᴀɴᴀᴍʙᴀʀʀ, R., Gᴀɴᴀᴍʙᴀʀʀ-Sᴛᴜʙʙs, M., Gᴀɴᴀᴍʙᴀʀʀ, B., Mᴀʏᴍᴜʀᴜ, D. and Sᴡᴇᴇɴᴇʏ, J. 2016. Bawaka Country. Co-becoming Bawaka: Towards a relational understanding of place/space. *Progress in Human Geography* 40. (4): 455–475. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515589437