



Natural enemies

Description

It's tempting to think of the natural world as a casualty of sophisticated communications technologies. Everywhere, always-on networked phones and computers diminish spatial demarcation, and threaten the uniqueness and placeness of natural environments. In their 1998 book *Contested Natures*, sociologists Phil Macnaghten and John Urry draw on various sources to argue the converse.

As spatial barriers diminish, so we become more sensitized to what different places in the world actually contain. Moreover, there is increasing competition between places to present themselves as attractive to potential investors, employers, tourists, and so on, to promote themselves, to sell themselves as service, skill and nature-rich places (140).



So even an instrumentalized, economic materialism tends to bring the natural into awareness and even to create the natural, via difference.

On the first page of their introduction (accessible via Amazon preview), Macnaghten and Urry provide a stark account of the diverse ways in which nature presents to us. They want to show that there's no single uncontested nature independent of the way people study, use, debate and negotiate it. They position themselves against 3 conventional ways that scholars think of nature.

1. **Environmental realism** asserts that nature exists independently of our reflection, and is best probed by scientific analysis: "Social practices play a minor role in any such analysis since the realities which derive from scientific inquiry are held to transcend the more superficial and transitory patterns of everyday life" (1).
2. **Environmental idealism** assumes that there are underlying and stable values that define natural places. I would position this with those who believe in *the spirit of place*, a somewhat romantic conception of the natural world, common enough in certain architectural discourses.
3. **Environmental instrumentalism** draws on cost benefit analyses to arbitrate on the value of nature and natural environments. Nature is what we must take care of for future generations and for the greater good.

In contrast to these positions theirs is sociological, cultural and pragmatic, asserting the crucial place of discursively *contested social practices*. Their approach advocates the importance of

- the way people talk about nature in everyday language
- how people sense and experience nature bodily; how people comport, utilise and talk about bodies (their own and other's) that invoke concepts of nature and the natural
- spatial relationships and the way space gets defined, managed or left alone, especially through concepts of the relationship between the local and the global
- time, particularly as those in authority construct the past and future, and plan for uncertainty
- frameworks for constructing human activity, involving risk, agency and trust.

This is my own paraphrasing. Their main contention, with which they lead in their first sentence, is that "there is no singular 'nature' as such, only a diversity of contested natures; and that each such nature is constituted through a variety of socio-cultural processes from which such natures cannot be plausibly separated" (1).

Natural networks

They wrote this book in the 1990s. I think networked digital technologies now intersect each of these themes in interesting ways. People talk about, represent and reflect on the natural through a diverse range of everyday digital media – not least digital photography, video, ad hoc travelogues in social media, navigation tools, etc. I like to think of nature *reconfigured* via these media, rather than diminished or enhanced.

Digitally moderated encounters with the natural represent bodies in relation to nature in some new ways. Think of how people put themselves in the picture when filming nature scenes. With a smartphone you can be in a local situation, but at the same time accessing information, posting commentary on Facebook, and in other ways playing around with the spatiality of where you are.

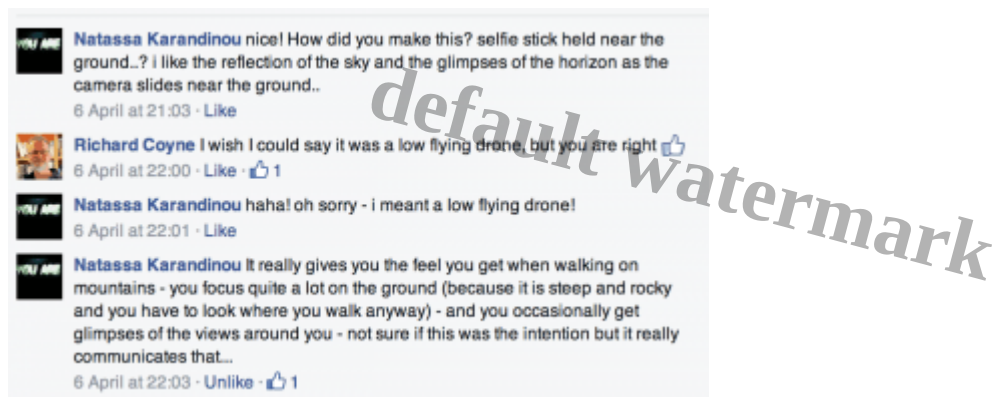
As well as obviating some of the time constraints of travel and communication, networked digital devices influence recollection, anticipation and planning. Via itineraries and other organisational tools

they feature in the way we order the day, the outing, as well as recording, monitoring, and way finding
or getting lost.

I like to think that digital networks are complicit in configuring and reconfiguring sets of relationships that constitute the natural. Here's an example from my own attempt to document a walk in the mountain region of Cyprus a few weeks ago.

<https://vimeo.com/124448723>

Such representations throw up differences. The video is nothing like being there, but might just emphasise aspects of the experience that otherwise go unnoticed and occlude others. I posted a lighter version of the video on Facebook, and it provoked the following charitable exchange.



The exercise could also have been a distraction for me, the walker, but it didn't take up much of the 6 hour journey around Mount Olympus. Recording the video was unpremeditated, though I had done it before in other contexts. At one stage we shoved my iPhone into a hole, hoping to see a snake. I recorded something rearing up ready to strike, but it might have been a tree root. Around the time I took the video selfie we realised we had taken the wrong path, encountered the wrong mine as described in the guidebook, discovered there was not enough detail in the iPhone map application to recover, and had to backtrack.

Bibliography

- Davidson, Lee. 2012. On nature's terms: Preserving the practice of traditional backcountry recreation in New Zealand's national parks. In Eric Dorfman (ed.), *Intangible Natural Heritage: New Perspectives on Natural Objects*. New York: Routledge.
- Macnaghten, Phil, and John Urry. 1998. *Contested Natures*. London: Sage

Notes

- Also see [Nature versus smartphones](#), and [Making nature](#).

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. nature
2. society

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