

CONSTRUCTING, CONSUMING, AND COMPLICATING THE HUMAN-  
NATURE BINARY: COMMUNICATION PRACTICES IN FOREST  
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

by

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**ABSTRACT**

This project combines interdisciplinary conversations within the field of communication to examine environmental meaning systems and communication practices in the context of forest environmental education. Due to concerns over children’s environmental alienation, there has been a continued push toward place-based environmental education. One such venture is the North Carolina Educational State Forest system (NCESF), where educators bring K-12 students into forests to help them reconnect with nature, expand environmental knowledge, and tackle what has been recently termed “nature-deficit disorder.” When students visit the sites, rangers deliver structured lessons on ecosystems and forest management to children and chaperones—lessons that must adhere to the state’s science curriculum.

I used interpretive and critical qualitative approaches to conduct a five-month study of communication practices in the NCESF system. As a participant observer, I paid attention to rangers’ daily practices and the spatial layout of the forests and trails, including a number of “talking-tree trails” throughout the sites. As an observer, I watched rangers teach lessons to students on one site. Additionally, I conducted in-depth interviews with forestry personnel

and analyzed texts and artifacts, such as curricula, teaching materials, forestry literature, and photographs that I took.

Situated within four extant bodies of literature—socially constructing nature, environmental communication, consumer and commercial appropriations of nature, and environmental education—my purpose in this study is threefold. First, I examine how rangers, teachers, forestry, and curricula conceptualize, construct, and frame nature and the role of humans in it. Next, I investigated how people, parties, and nature resist and complicate dominant framings. Last, I explored the possible intersections and implications of what is being constructed, produced, and performed about human-nature relations in the forest sites. This study is further contextualized within larger cultural and educational practices to expand environmental communication research, reexamine forest environmental education, and retheorize nature-deficit disorder.

This study's findings point to three analyses and corresponding theses that rearticulate human-nature relations. First, in the forest sites, people and parties frame nature as tightly organized and contained—as scientific, named, managed, gendered, a physical place, disciplined, competitive, different, and ocularcentric. These framings maintain a traditional nature-culture binary that promotes what I call a *get close-stay away* dialectic, sending children the message to get close enough to trees to advocate for them, but far enough away to be comfortable with cutting them down and using them.

Second, people and parties frame nature as produced for human use, where trees exist in abundance and are central to commerce. This framing points to a *production-consumption* context and cycle that reproduces consumer relationships with nature and necessitates the production of trees. Third, humans and nature alike challenge dominant framings through

subtle acts of resistance and autonomy, through expressions of awe and wonder, and in adults' stories of "when I was young." I conceptualize these resistances as *interrupted boundaries*, which disrupt and complicate the human-nature binary.

I then use the three theses to retheorize and rediagnose nature-deficit disorder, pointing instead to schizophrenic-like relations that contribute to human-nature alienation. Nature-deficit disorder and my research site position the cause of environmental problems as decreased exposure to the outdoors and advocate for children to go back to nature as a solution. This move sidesteps important issues that contribute to environmental estrangement among adults and children. Incorporating ecopsychology and the environmental communication concept of "mediation," I argue that the metaphor of schizophrenia allows environmental degradation and environmental education to be conceptualized and addressed differently and enables the nature-culture binary itself to be consumed. I end with a number of future directions for environmental education practices that address the nature-culture split. Ultimately, this study adds to environmental communication research by retheorizing nature-deficit disorder and environmental education and envisions new ways of thinking about human-nature relations.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>xvi</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Rationale and Background.....</i>	2
Environmental Immediacy.....	3
Dualistic Thinking and Human-Nature Binaries.....	7
Youth and Nature.....	10
Nature-Deficit Disorder.....	13
<i>Research Site and Context.....</i>	16
The North Carolina Educational State Forest System.....	17
State and Local Agencies.....	21
Federal Forestry.....	23
<i>Research Questions.....</i>	25
<i>Researcher Perspective.....</i>	27
An Interpretive Approach.....	27
A Critical Approach.....	28
<i>Preview of Chapters.....</i>	30
<b>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<i>Socially Constructing Nature.....</i>	33
Construction Arguments.....	33
Construction Processes and Outcomes.....	37
Scientific Constructions.....	43
Political Constructions.....	47

<i>Communication and Nature-Human Relations</i> .....	49
Overview and Approaches.....	50
Mediating Nature-Human Relations .....	54
Environmental Communication Studies Informing this Project.....	56
<i>Consumer and Commercial Appropriations of Nature</i> .....	58
Public and Commercial Intersectionality.....	62
<i>Environmental Education</i> .....	63
Environmental Education Legislation.....	63
Environmental Education Research.....	65
<b>CHAPTER THREE: METHODS</b> .....	<b>70</b>
<i>Data Collection Methodology</i> .....	70
Observation of Lessons.....	70
Participant Observation of the Sites .....	71
Collection of Interviews.....	72
Collection of Texts and Artifacts.....	74
The Use of Fieldnotes.....	74
<i>Description of the Data</i> .....	76
Observations.....	77
Participant Observations.....	79
Talking Trails.....	80
Interviews and Artifacts.....	83
<i>Data Analyses</i> .....	84

**CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS I: ORGANIZING AND CONFINING**

**NATURE.....88**

*Scientific*..... 91

*Named and Identified*..... 93

*Managed*..... 99

*Gendered*..... 107

*A Physical Place*..... 113

*Disciplined*..... 123

    Disciplining Nature..... 123

    Disciplining Visitors..... 130

*Competitive*..... 144

*Different*..... 149

*Focused on Sight (Ocularcentric)*..... 152

**CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS II: PRODUCING AND USING NATURE..... 162**

*Abundant Producer*..... 162

*Exists for Human Use*..... 163

*Central to Industry*..... 170

**CHAPTER SIX: FINDINGS III: RESISTING CONSTRUCTIONS.....179**

*Performing Resistance and Autonomy*..... 179

*Awe and Wonder*..... 182

    “*When I Was Young*”..... 187

**CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS..... 192**

*Project Summary*..... 193

<i>Reararticulating the Human-Nature Binary: Three Theses</i> .....	195
Thesis I: <i>Get Close-Stay Away</i> Dialectic: Constructing the Binary.....	195
Get Close: “It’s OK To Be a Tree Lover”.....	196
Stay Away: “Tree Cookies” and “Enemies”.....	198
Thesis II: <i>Production-Consumption</i> Context and Cycle: Consuming Trees and Consumerism.....	206
Promoting Producer-Consumer Relationships.....	207
Public-Commercial Intersectionality.....	212
Thesis III: <i>Interrupting Boundaries</i> : Complicating the Binary.....	215
<i>Rediagnosing Nature-Deficit Disorder</i> .....	225
A Summary of Nature-Deficit Disorder.....	227
Merits to Nature-Deficit Disorder.....	228
Critiquing Nature-Deficit Disorder.....	229
A Rediagnosis: Schizophrenic-like Human-Nature Relations.....	234
Consuming the Nature-Culture Binary.....	246
<i>Alternative Directions for Practice</i> .....	248
Reconceptualizing Forestry and Forest Environmental Education.....	249
Reconceptualizing Space and Time: Crossing “The Bridge to Nowhere” ...	252
Behavioral, Cognitive, and Emotional Modifications.....	255
The Case of the Interrupting Bird.....	262
Respeaking for/with Nature.....	263
<i>Final Thoughts</i> .....	264

<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>266</b>
Appendix A: Interview Guide.....	266
Appendix B: Chart Summarizing Nature-Deficit Disorder and Schizophrenia Diagnoses .....	268
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>270</b>

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Number	Page
1. Map of North Carolina Educational State Forest Sites.....	18
2. Talking Trails: Trees, Rocks, and Mules.....	81
3. Teaching Materials Used in Lessons .....	84
4. Nature as Organized and Contained.....	89
5: Forest Demonstration Trail.....	101
6. Nature as Gendered.....	110
7. Nature as a Physical Place to Go To.....	116
8. Nature as a Physical Place to Go Through.....	119
9. Site Trail Map.....	122
10. Nature as a Sensory Experience.....	156
11. Producing and Using Nature: Tree Identification Signs.....	165
12. Commercial Sponsorship.....	175
13. The Objectified Partitioning of Nature.....	202
14. Interrupted Boundaries: A “Crooked” Tree Performing Resistance .....	223
15. “The Bridge to Nowhere”.....	254