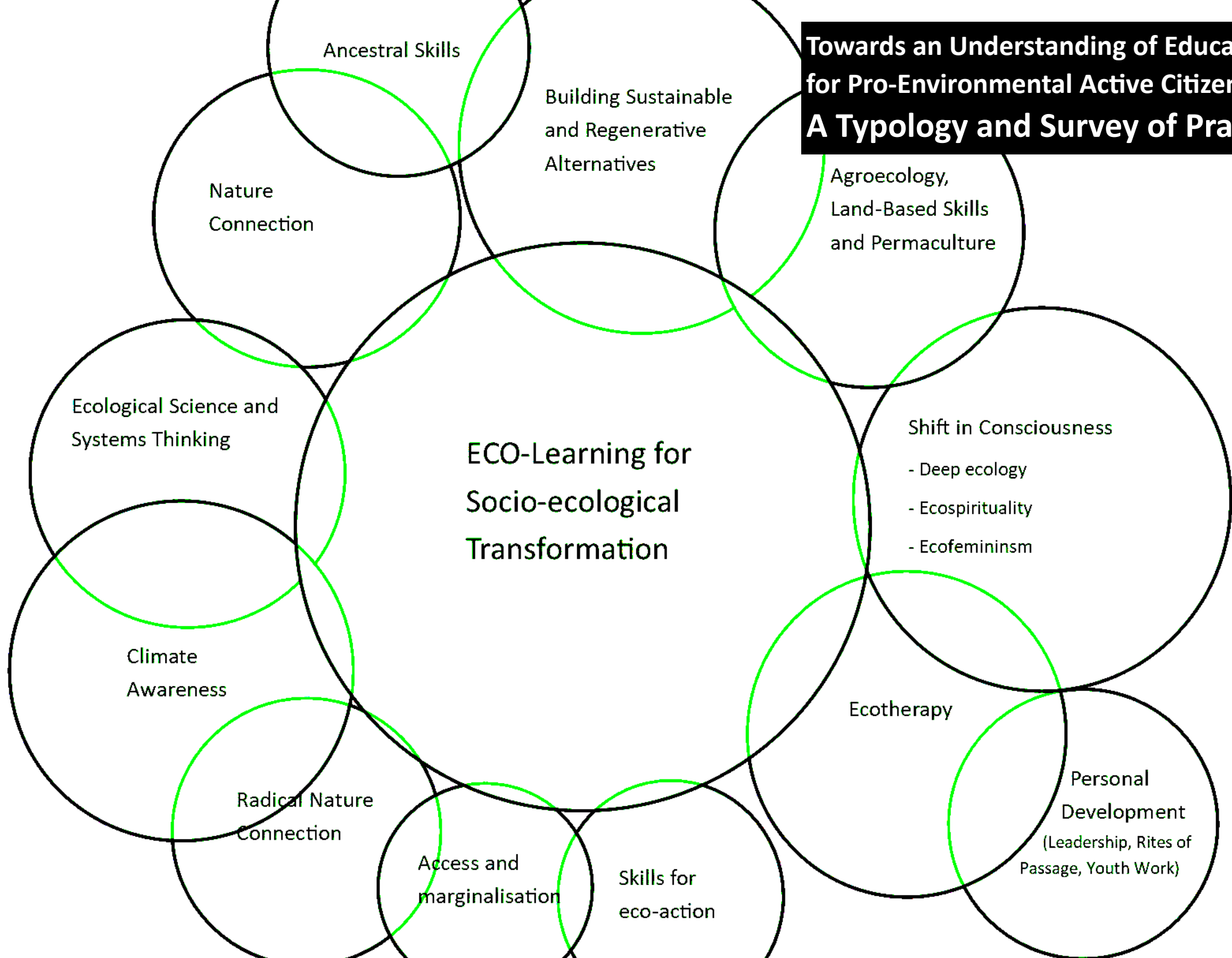


Towards an Understanding of Education for Pro-Environmental Active Citizenship: A Typology and Survey of Practice



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Background

The climate crisis, loss of biodiversity and habitat, and the impact of these on communities across the planet are some of the most pressing challenges of our time. The scale of these challenges and the depth of transformation they demand, ask a lot of us. As the Rio Earth Charter put it, we live in “a time of great peril and great promise.”

Meeting environmental challenges will require the engagement of civil society and active citizens. A vibrant and dynamic civil society with high levels of active citizenship and volunteerism in support of pro-environmental behaviour and action are crucial.

Adult education has already proven itself effective in supporting pro-environmental behaviour. Environmental education can raise ‘problem-awareness’, encourage a sense of ‘perceived responsibility’, and strengthen a sense of ‘self-efficacy’, all of which have been seen to promote pro-environmental behaviour by individuals.

However, in the experience of the researchers and authors of this paper, most educational interventions promoting pro-environmental behaviour tend to stop with supporting in individual behaviour change (such as recycling, environmental consumerism, etc). There is very little environmental education designed to motivate and sustain the community-based initiatives, environmental volunteerism and the collective action or active citizenship needed to meet the scale of the challenge we face.

This leads to the key challenge this research aims to explore: The lack of wide-spread knowledge, methods, and resources to support adult education capable of supporting pro-environmental active citizenship and fostering environmental citizenship.

To help us to understand the challenges involved and survey relevant contemporary approaches in the field of ecological education we undertook to develop a typology of environmental education relevant to pro-environmental action.

This paper complements an integrated body of research and educational resources that we hope will provide the basis for an ongoing programme of training and education that can inspire, motivate, sustain and equip people to engage in collective forms of action supporting social transformation towards more ecologically sustainable, regenerative, and socially just practices. The complementary resources include academic research, and Learners Competence Framework and Modular Curriculum, innovative Blended Learning and Online resources, and a Trainers Manual.

Who is it for?

This paper is aimed to support adult educators, trainers, and facilitators engaged in promoting pro-environmental behaviour and active citizenship. In addition, we hope it will support improved understanding of the issues for other change-makers, activists, civil society organisations promoting sustainability, and seeking to address climate change through adult learning opportunities.

Who are we?

The main research and writing has been done by two nature connection and activist educators working with Transformative Education CIC (UK), May Mackeith and Kara Moses, with support from team members from the Ulex Project (Spain) especially Gee, Wandelwerk (Germany), and Vedegylet (Hungary). It has been supported by funding from the EU Erasmus Plus Programme, through a KA2 Strategic Partnership Grant. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.



The process

1. Building the database and survey

We began by building a list of key practitioners through discussions and interviews with practitioners across the existing networks of our partners and colleagues. Following these leads and complimenting this with online research we compiled a list of 70+ organisations and practitioners whose work falls within the broadly defined field of *ecological and environmental education supporting socio-ecological transformation*.

With this database we conducted a survey using a questionnaire, published documentation, and follow up conversations, to gain an overview of types of activity and practices in the field. This enabled us to compile a list of the areas that these educators consider their work to include.

That full list includes: *nature connection, youth work, access to land for people without it, seasonal awareness, traditional knowledge, traditional practices, climate awareness, environmental action, food growing, power analysis, anti-racist, radical nature connection, consciousness raising, queering, racial justice, decolonisation, learning about nature, ecology (as science/worldview), systems thinking, community and ecology, sustainability and economics, re-localisation and regenerative practices, regenerative agriculture, permaculture, rites of passage, LGBT+ rights, Work that Reconnects, talking about reconnection, enacting reconnection/nature connection, urban links to nature, land based skills, ancestral skills, leadership, ritual/ceremony, land rights, ecological restoration, deep ecology, spirituality, ecothera- py, re-awakening animist perspectives, practical skills (eg eco-building, renewables), re- search.*

2. Case studies and interviews

Based on the initial research and survey, we identified specific practitioners and organisations who we invited to participate in in depth interviews and discussions. We then subjected these case studies to an in-depth analysis, generating a further list of key topics and approaches.

Key terms and interests that emerged through coding of interviews included: systemic, relational, action, transformational experiences, transformational experiences, therapy, training trainers, decolonisation, ancestral skills/perspectives, rewilding, community building, resilience, vision, ecological restoration, marginalised groups, indigenous perspectives, story, spirituality, critical approaches, power analysis, embodiment/somatics, grief work, collaboration, adaptive approaches, explicit values, accountability, resisting neoliberalism / capitalism, liberation, self-nature-others, economics, deep time, hope, conflict resolution, trust, black feminism, humility, group work, trauma, framing. This process also enabled us to identify a range



Findings that informed the typology

Our main interest in developing this typology has been to ensure that we have been able to draw on a full range of best practice relevant to our primary aims of draw on and enhance approaches to ecological education so as to increase the capacity of practitioners doing such work to support learners in developing, taking and sustaining collective action that responds to the multiple and ongoing crises related to ecological destruction, climate change and related aspects of social injustice.

Having surveyed a wide range of approaches, engaged in more in-depth discussion and analysis with other practitioners, we used what we had found to construct a typology of dimensions of ecological and environmental education.

Defining the field was itself challenging. Allowing an ecological view to inform our own thinking here, we perceive that edges and boundaries are often found to be fluid, permeable, and difficult to finally draw in a definitive way. This is especially true when we are engaging with a range of practice carried out by people who themselves are influenced by ecological ways of seeing. Often, they take an holistic approach, which is able to recognise the relationship between parts and the multiplicity of contributions within complex systems (especially living systems). They often also emphasise understanding things in relationship, rather than as separate and discrete elements. As a response to this we decided to follow an approach that reflects the boundaries around the field largely as shaped by the self-definitions of practitioners themselves.

The holistic and systemic nature of the field and the challenges it seeks to address, also give rise to a high level of overlap between approaches. In addition, very similar approaches, depending on how the approach is combined with other elements or informed by values or the intentionality of practitioners, can have quite distinct meaning or significance. Consequently, the typology seeks to name a range of approaches and methods, all of which come into different sets of relationships within the work of different practitioners.

Perhaps one of the most complex areas to unpack here is the interconnection between personal transformation, changes in interpersonal relationships (within groups and organisa-

tions), shifts in social relationships (both within communities and wider society), and transitions towards ways of life (economic, social, technological, etc) that express ecological integrity. This leads to a rich interplay between learning geared towards shifts in consciousness (mindsets, values, and attitudes), the acquisition of knowledge (about the natural world, scientific frameworks and insights, and history), and the development of skills for social and ecological transformation.

Similarly, we find a curious relationship between the new and the old, which challenges mindsets assume a positive value for progress and development. The kind of approach being developed by many of the practitioners we surveyed and interviewed include both learning and unlearning, as well as a blend of cutting-edge scientific insights with ancestral knowledge and wisdom.

One of the edges that practitioners were keen to emphasise was the difference between environmental education and ecological learning. For many of them the term environmental held the connotation as of that which surrounds us, is somehow outside and apart from humanity. In a more ecological view, humanity is clearly embedded within nature, a part of the ecological web. Consequently, although environmental science and education offer insights and understanding that can enrich and inform the kind of learning these practitioners are mostly aiming to foster, a (permeable) edge was defined with environmental education sitting outside of the field.

We also found that most practitioners were operating with some kind of theory of change, even if it was fairly embryonic. Once again, these theories were usually underpinned by an holistic and systems view, which acknowledged the importance of a range of contributions to the complex process of social change. We found that a simple way of categorising that range of contributions, adapted from the methodology known as the *Work that Reconnects*, included three types of action: a) *Shifting Consciousness* (fostering changes in mindsets and values), b) *Creating Alternatives* (building new economies, communities and socio-ecological infrastructure), and c) *Stopping Actions* (forms of resistance that aim to defend the natural world and communities from further harm and exploitation).

From the outset of the project, which has taken the form of a cross-disciplinary exploration, we were already working with an understanding of three interrelated fields that informed the work of the partner organisations.

These were:

1) **Nature Connection Education** uses immersive contact with the natural world to help people gain knowledge and build a sense of connection. As well as strengthening motivation for pro-environmental behaviour (Giubey & Oberhauser, 2009; Dutcher et al., 2007; Frantz & Meyer 2009, ZCB), this field is increasingly championed for multiple other benefits, such as physical and mental health (Environment and Human Health and University of Exeter Medical School publications) and emotional resilience (Wells, 2003).

2) **Environmental Psychology** is a discipline addressing the thoughts, feelings and actions of individuals in their environment as well as human-environment-interactions. Psychology of environmental protection is a sub-discipline of environmental psychology. In this field of research, psychological theories and models are applied to environmental protection and explain environmental actions and experiences in the context of many influencing factors. Environmental psychology points out how environmentally friendly behaviour can be measured by psychological research and how behaviour and motivation can be understood.

3) **Ecological Literacy** is closely related to systems thinking and explorations concerning emerging ecological worldviews (Du Plessis & Brandon, 2015). The term was championed by educators such as Fritjof Capra and Stefan Harding. Ecological literacy helps learners to recognise the connectedness between things, humans, and the natural world. It has been specifically applied to help citizens recognise the energy flows within their communities and understand conditions for resilience and sustainability.

The typology

Integrating these various elements we arrived at a typology of approaches and forms of ecological education with 12 categories, most of which are interconnected and overlapping:

Nature Connection

This cluster of approaches includes forms of ecological learning that almost exclusively take place outdoors in natural settings. It incorporates a wide range of activities that fall under the heading of ‘bushcraft skills’, such as tracking, basic survival skills, identification of species and gaining knowledge about the natural world (*environmental education*), and so on. But the goal of *nature connection* activities goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills to consciously include supporting significant shifts in attitude and world view, as well as therapeutic elements related to restoring a sense of felt connection with the non-human world.

Ecological Science and Systems Thinking

The entire field owes a great deal to the insights and frameworks for understanding the world that have been derived and developed from academic disciplines related to ecological science. Emphasising understanding things in context and relationship, rather than as discrete entities, and recognising the importance of flows and interconnections in living systems, ecology can be understood as implying a paradigmatic shift that can underpin new mindsets that go beyond previously dominant reductive and mechanistic ways of understanding the world. Systems thinking and holistic approaches also play an important part in this ensemble of conceptual influences. While there are educators who focus on the theoretical aspects of this area, very often elements are used to support experiential learning and offer frameworks that can underpin deeper shifts in mindsets.

Climate Awareness

Although this area can sit to some extent within the ecological science, there is so much specific educational work going on that relates specifically to the climate crisis that it deserves a category for itself. This kind of education is highly diffuse, including campaign work, consciousness raising, and the promotion of the knowledge through wide ranging media.

Building Sustainable and Regenerative Alternatives

Creating alternatives isn’t easy! While many have learnt the hard way, by trial and error,

increasingly learning from decades of experience is being systematised and shared through trainings that aim to help people do such things as: set up ecovillages, building communities, adopt value aligned governance structures, design sustainable local economies, eco-building, renewable and sustainable energy systems, and so on. Usually informed by ecological mindset, these trainings are highly practical, but also interface with therapeutic self-awareness and development in service of enhancing inter-personal relationships for collaboration and community building.

Agroecology, Land-Based Skills and Permaculture

While these skills overlap with Building Alternatives, it is a clear enough focus area to be separately categorised. This area combines skills, knowledge and attitudinal competences, related to interventions that directly engage with land, natural ecology and growing. It includes training in regenerative agriculture, permaculture, organic growing, land based skills (such as woodland management), food production, ecological restoration, and rewilding.

Ancestral Skills

Often integrated within learning bushcraft and wilderness living, this area emphasises the rich heritage of skills and wisdom from past generations. The skills and knowledge are often becoming lost and destroyed, replaced by modern practices and new technologies. The restoration of this knowledge is often felt to support a reclaiming of ecological wisdom from our ancestors. This can take the form of the sharing and transmission of specific indigenous traditions and practices. Increasingly this extends into learning about value systems, cosmologies, and ways of seeing/living.

Shift in Consciousness

Supporting a shift in consciousness was one of the most common things educators told us was a key aim for them. Clearly learning almost always involves certain mental/cognitive changes, but in this case the shifts referred to are usually closely related to the complimentary notion of paradigm shift, especially a shift away from an anthropocentric, reductivist, progress oriented mindset, towards an ‘ecological consciousness’. Three prominent sets of practice that deserve to be named sub-categories are:

- a) **Eco-spirituality**, which often overlaps with ancestral and indigenous learning, the restoration of paganism and animistic sensibilities, and involves the use of ritual and ceremony;
- b) **Deep Ecology**, which has been developed as a strand of radical ecological thought and practice, which places emphasis on connection with wilderness, critiquing anthropocentric

tendencies, and often regards civilisation as a historical fall away from a closer and sustainable ways of life. Deep ecology aims to support people to develop an ‘ecological consciousness’ whereby they regain a felt sense of solidarity with all life;

c) **Ecofeminism** is a diverse body of work including both social and cultural eco-feminist approaches. In its cultural forms it tends to replace the anthropocentrism of Deep Ecology with an emphasis on the problem of androcentrism. In its social form it integrates critiques of patriarchy with wider socio-political analysis largely inline with Radical Nature Connection, discussed below.

Personal Development

Outdoor education has often overlapped with activities supporting personal development. This has been especially the case in youth work and forest schools or camps, where the natural setting and community living provide a context for general personal growth and discovery. With adults this quite often relates to areas such as leadership skills and team building activities. Often such work has little connection to the ecological and socio-ecological transformation we are focused on in this research, but as in other areas, the intention and framing of such activities can make a difference. We can see this especially in Rites of Passage work, which can include immersion in wild natural settings, solo time, and connect with ancestral and indigenous traditions.

Ecotherapy

Therapeutic work that takes place in nature, often using the natural world as a mirror and context for self-awareness and discovery is a growing field. Ecotherapy includes approaches which see connections between the mental health of individuals and the health of the relationships between society and the ecological, as well as the wellbeing of the ecological sphere itself. Clearly this reflects an ecological mindset that refuses to understand mental health as an attribute of discrete individuals and instead views it more systemically. Attending to climate grief and despair work are significant aspect of ecotherapeutic work. While often carried out by professional therapists, this therapeutic dimension is often integrated with group work processes such as the Work the Reconnects.

Skills for Collective Environmental Action

While focused on interpersonal and organising skills, this kind of educational work applies an ecological mindset and framework to equip people to engage in forms of environmental action. This can include training in areas such as leadership development, systems of ac-

countability, skills for collaboration, working with group dynamics, inter-personal skills, and conflict resolution. The frameworks and skills are often derived from the field of ecological learning and community building, and integrate systemic and holistic ways of seeing the world and human relationships.

Access and marginalisation

For practitioners bringing an understanding of structural power and social injustice to their work, one of the ways those dynamics is keenly felt is in relationship to access to land and natural spaces. This gives rise to some interconnected themes and practices. One aspect of this is education about land rights and ownership, the history of land ownership, and campaigning for reforms or changes. A second area of practice relates to offering and creating access to nature connection activities, natural spaces, and other forms of ecological learning opportunity to marginalised groups who tend to have far less access to these spaces and opportunities. This can include activities where ecological and nature-based learning is adapted to urban settings.

Radical Nature Connection

A number of practitioners were very explicit about integrating an analysis of structural power within their nature-based and ecological work. This led them to see connections between ecological disconnection, capitalist society, colonialist history, racism and heteronormativity. Radical Nature Connection often sits in a critical relationship with other aspects of nature-based and ecological learning in its foregrounding of structural injustice and its exploration of the implications of this for the ways that such education is carried out. This includes practices such as ‘queering’ nature, critiques of cultural appropriation in the field, applying decolonial pedagogical approaches. Integrating these elements, RNC practitioners seek to augment and improve what they regard as less radical approaches.

