

NATURE AND ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION: THE GOD OF ECOLOGY WITHIN THE IMAGINATIVE HORIZON OF ENVIRONMENTALISM¹

ISABEL CRISTINA DE MOURA CARVALHO², CARLOS ALBERTO STEIL³

*Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and
pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to the body and soul.*
John Muir

*Even if you think zoos are boring or just for children, a trip to
the Berlin zoo is a must. In what other place, (except for China,
of course!) can you come face to face with a panda, the Chinese
bear, rare because it does not reproduce in captivity? The
panda attracts thousands of people to the zoo. You feel you are
better for seeing it. Why is that? I don't know, but I did.*
Ignácio de Loyola Brandão

*When my eyes are dirty from civilization, they feel an inner
desire for trees and birds.*
Manoel de Barros

The concept of nature has caused considerable upheaval to current conceptions of human happiness. The scenic qualities and power of natural places as potential sources of well-being are not just arguments employed by the eco-tourism industry or spiritualities of the *religions of the self*^f. These attributes strongly resonate with many people's experiences. When individuals talk about their relationship with natural environments, they are described as authentic sites for the rediscovery of a lost dimension of happiness and human fulfilment, as we have observed in a number of field studies conducted with groups participating in environmental education activities and ecologically-based religious experiencesⁱⁱ.

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2. Post-Graduate Program in Education/Faculty of Education. E-mail: isabel.carvalho@puers.br

3. Post-Graduate in Anthropology - PPGAS E-mail: steil.carlosalberto@gmail.com

Thus, it could be said that expectations of health, well-being, fulfillment, an approximation to the sacred, healing and aesthetic enjoyment come together with the contemporary experience of valuing nature. Above all, we refer to the perception of the ways in which urban populations give meanings to the contemplation of bucolic landscapes and trips to nature parks, mountains, zoos and botanic gardens, as well as spaces which are conceived as *wildlife sanctuaries*ⁱⁱⁱ. These are natural, pristine environments which, in their original extensiveness within national territories, no longer exist. The usual purpose of these *sanctuaries* is to protect landscapes of great scenic beauty. We also include in this perception the dissemination of a diffuse and widespread environmental sensibility, expressed both in policies for establishing conservation units and in environmental movements that fight against the implementation of large infrastructure projects which threaten natural heritage.

The questions which instigated our research are: what supports the current idea that contact with nature is a restorative experience? What are the continuities and/or ruptures in the relationship between the visitors who go to parks and conservation units in the 21st century and the founders of the first national parks in the 19th century? Do current visitors share the same romantic-conservationist feelings expressed by the pioneers of conservationism? Are environmental ideology and ethics, which marked the actions of conservationists in the past, still a powerful mobilizing force for contemporary ecologists? Why did/do people in the 19th and 21st centuries feel *better* near nature? What makes writers such as Ignácio de Loyola Brandão (2008) imagine they would be *better people* for having seen a panda bear in a zoo in Berlin and would this be the same sentiment which led John Muir (1912) to want to protect bears and live with them in Yosemite?

Perhaps part of the answer lies in the contraposition between the *eyes, dirty from civilization* and the *desire for trees and birds* as described by Manoel de Barros. It is no coincidence that this poem comes from a book entitled *O livro de pré-coisas* [The Book of Pre-things] (BARROS, 1997). It alludes to our desire to return to an idealized, pre-civilized state when “good” nature reigned, untouched and unblemished. Perhaps the source of this feeling of reverence in face of *wilderness* can be found in an existential zone imagined as prior, previous and pristine, and which is associated to spiritual elevation, moral regeneration and an ideal of happiness spanning recent centuries.

Far from seeking to interpret this experience of nature as an innocent search for authenticity, or even as an *ecological mistake* (ALPHANDÉRY; BITOUN; DUPONT, 1992; CRONON, 1996), we are interested in understanding its ideological, imaginative, aesthetic, religious and moral roots. After all, within a secularized society, what makes nature retain its aura of sacredness and appear as a source of asceticism capable of steering the behavior and guiding the experiences of a large number of people? In other words, we seek to understand how the experience of the sacredness of nature, as expressed in the practices and the narratives of human subjects in the 21st century, relates to the process of secularization and disenchantment of the world which occurred in the West. We argue that the relationship with nature itself has changed. It is no longer associated to perceiving the presence of a transcendent God within the *book of nature*, as the precursors of the *wilderness* ideology of the 19th century did. Today, it is a question of

finding oneself, as a reflection of nature, elevated to the condition of sacredness in the immanence of this world.

Thus, the object of our recent studies has been the environmental, spiritualist, religious and educational practices which are conducted in natural spaces. The observation of these practices allows us to suppose the existence of a recurrent narrative which professes the naturalization of human beings whilst, at the same time, extolling and sacralizing nature. This double movement of re-introducing humans to the environment and sacralizing nature has allowed for a greater approximation between humans and non-humans and resulted in a critique of the anthropocentric vision prevalent in the West in both modern Christianity and scientific rationalism over the past few centuries. Thus, the nature which emerges in the imaginative field moves away from objectified meanings and takes on subjective characteristics, an alterity which confronts humanity as its absolute other. In this way, nature acquires the characteristics which used to be attributed to Gods and sacred beings, the object of rituals, cosmologies, cults and myths. The displacement of the sacred attributes of Gods toward nature has led to a new *imaginative horizon* of spirituality, redefining religious practices and narratives in the West (CRAPANZANO 2005).

The concept of an imaginative horizon relates to the blurring of the boundaries of experience between space-time - perceived as a situational "here and now" - and what lies beyond the immediate present landscape. Imaginative horizons bring together aspects of memory, idealizations, aesthetic-cultural repertoires, desires and, above all, creative arrangements in such a way that these elements - which deeply impact on our lives and the way we interpret our present experiences (CRAPANZANO, 2005, p.7) - are recreated. These horizons open imaginative windows which reflect the need to disconnect, and they are a part of the human way of being, knowing and acting in the world. They are not fancy flights of the imagination or techniques restricted to the artistic sphere. They are phenomena which embody the emergence of a common, pre-verbal perceptive environment which operates as a pre-text (VELHO, 1995) and situates reality within the time-space horizon of the imagination. From the point of view of building the common ground which makes up the social sphere, (TAYLOR, 2002, p. 106), the imaginative horizon:

mainly designates the ways in which people imagine their social existences, how they relate to other people, how things happen between them and their peers, how people address their expectations and deepest notions, images and rules which underpin these expectations.

The field of the *spiritualities of the self* which is associated to nature is seen as highly fragmented and diverse. Nevertheless, the experiences which we have observed in our research show that in ritual and narrative terms, certain phenomena are recurrent. Furthermore, some of these practices are common to experiences which veer both toward a religious and an environmental perspective, such as meditation, the contemplation of nature, circular dances, breathing techniques and the value attached to natural foods (for example, wholesome, healthy and organic). Thus, there are a set of rituals and ecological

narratives which make up an imaginative horizon of lasting values and dispositions. These could be described by what we have labelled an *ecological-spiritual habitus*, resulting in a social and aesthetically informed social body (BOURDIEU 1989).

The *spiritualities of the self* and ecological events

Rituals and experiences linked to spiritualities known as *New Age*^{iv} have become more frequent in environmental education events and activities, playing an important role in their agendas. These rituals and experiences are generally presented as a means of accessing the dimensions of the cosmos and human subjectivity which rational knowledge or conventional religious practices are unable to reach. They have atavistic and telluric origins and are usually associated to indigenous, eastern or even pre-Christian traditions. By way of a recent example, during the 7th Environmental Education Forum which took place in March 2012 in Salvador, Brazil, among the meetings organized by environmental education groups and networks, the *sacred tent* space stood out. It was described as a:

space known as the *Sacred Tent*. It provides participants with a number of activities from open sessions of circular dances and bio-dances, to others such as Lambe-Lambe Theatre and the Trilha da Vida [our italics]. This space is specifically geared towards well-being and inner ecology^v.

A space dedicated to the sacred in ecological events was not an innovation of the 7th Forum. They were already in evidence in other Forums and have gradually become an integral part of agendas since at least 1992, at the Rio-92 Conference. During this event, which took place at the Aterro do Flamengo, vigils held by religious groups such as Ananda Marga, Hare Krishna, Santo Daime and União do Vegetal were positively perceived as an important step toward developing an ecological sensibility. A similar scenario was played out in 2012, during the Rio+20 Conference, albeit with nuances and a slightly different emphasis, reflecting changes in the social and environmental movements over the past 20 years. At the Rio+20 event, indigenous people with painted bodies and wearing feathered headdresses featured prominently, as well as representatives of African-based religious groups, chanting to the beat of drums. Thus, for a few days, the *wilderness* of Brazil's imagined community, which had been exiled to the backwaters of the nation, emerged in the urban space of the metropolis where the event was staged.

Thus, ecological events become boundary spaces. That is, privileged spaces for the emergence and the staging of meetings between nature and culture, the primitive and the civilized, the traditional and the modern, redrawing the urban landscape of the global metropolis, even if only for a few days. One of the effects this had on the minds and bodies of those living in cities was to reinforce their civilizational discomfort and inscribe in their imaginations the "desire for trees and birds" which, in the poetry of Manoel de Barros, counteracts "eyes, dirty from civilization". That is, regardless as to whether they are associated to any particular spiritual tradition, when "trees and birds" are confront-

ted with the artefacts of our modern and urban life, they become the signs of a certain mysticism of nature which contributes to produce an aura around the idea of nature as a place for restoring the happiness lost during the civilizing process. This mythical power attributed to nature gradually forges an environmental sensibility which is incorporated as a characteristic of ecologically-minded modern subjects.

Within this game of opposites, nature - imagined as wild and pristine - occupies the place of the divinity as a source of reference for ethics and aesthetics. Urbanization and life in the large metropolises have helped to reinforce the image that, somewhere, nature can be found or restored to its primitive and untouchable condition, in opposition to the city's environment. This imaginative horizon is shared by both environmental movements seeking to influence the policies related to the creation of Conservation Units, and by individuals who see these spaces as privileged sites for aesthetic enjoyment, ethical and moral elevation, healing and well-being. Sometimes, this restorative experience of nature is imposed disregarding the objective conditions of the natural spaces with which they are strongly associated. Schama (1996, p.17) illustrates this disjunction in reference to the Yosemite park in California:

The first American Eden is also the most famous: Yosemite. Although its car park is almost as big as the park itself and the bears sniff around McDonald's packaging, we imagine Yosemite as Albert Bierstadt painted it, or as Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams photographed it: without any traces of human presence. It is clear that the act of identifying (not to mention photographing) the place presupposes human presence and the heavy cultural baggage this implies.

The emergence of the concept of *wilderness* and the sacralization of nature

One of the most important threads weaving ecological sensibility seems to be the concept of *wilderness*. Considering the limitations of this article, our aim is to simply point to some of the main historical landmarks of this concept during the last three centuries. Its origins can be traced back to the role of emblematic figures in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century who were engaged in personal and political struggles to defend the conservation of nature by setting up parks and environmental preservation areas. Although conservationist ideals and the demarcation of environmental preservation areas first emerged in the United States, these concepts were subsequently disseminated to many countries in the West, including Brazil, as the political foundations of nature conservation policies. It is possible to see traces of continuity between the narratives of the pioneers of conservationism, like Henry Thoreau, John Muir and Aldo Leopold who forged the concept of *wilderness*, and current environmental narratives, in which the behavior and actions of subjects acting on the political and social stage are based on an ecological perspective.

According to Cronon (1996), in a secularized society, the concept of wilderness *evokes universal values and meanings which idealize nature as an atemporal source of lay ethics and ecological asceticism*. To a certain extent, in the imagination of subjects who think

themselves modern and civilized, the concept of wilderness reiterates the myth of the good savage, which underpins the narrative of American colonization. Thus, the struggle between the primitive and the civilized is extended to the environmental field, under a new romantic version of the epic struggles between evil civilization and virtuous nature. In this way, the denial of nature in the civilizational enterprise is an imaginative resource which, in contrast to culture, allows for an experience of transcendence within secular society. The founding alterity of humanity which in the Christian narrative was expressed in terms of the radical opposition between the Creator and His creature is displaced to the opposition between culture and nature.

A major milestone in the development of the wilderness concept is the work and the exemplary life of Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), the author of *Walden, or Life in the Woods*^{vi}. In his book, Thoreau proposed to set up a world as an alternative to the modern society of the time, based on civil disobedience and self-sufficiency expressed by the denial of the market and an asceticism grounded in self-imposed limits in relation to consumer goods. Thus, he preaches the ideal of a simple life close to nature. He sought refuge in the forest to show the viability of a self-sufficient life among natural surroundings and he became the precursor, and in a certain way, the founding myth of countless alternative communities linked to the modern ecological movement. Similarly, by purposefully making his personal life a tool for political criticism, he was also the precursor of a style of political action which was given renewed value by countercultural ecological movements. His work and his life, therefore, became a model and an inspiration for a “first person politics” or a politics of experience (CARVALHO, 2006). His daily struggle for survival in the natural environment was carefully recorded in a very detailed diary and subsequently published in the previously mentioned book which, in turn, went on to become a guide for ecological action. The project criticizes the *status quo*, based on his retreat into nature, and remains an emblematic critique of the industrial capitalist society and an appraisal of his opposing point of view: nature as a place for authenticity, the good and the beautiful.

Conservationism and the *invention* of the United States

The idealization of wildlife as part of an aesthetic, moral and political heritage is an important element in the invention of the United States in terms of the construction of the moral character of the American man. In the 19th century, conservationist thinking, therefore, was part of a wider movement associated to the expansion of the frontier to the west, conquering and integrating this territory to the Federation and affirming the moral values of the nation. The dissemination of these values throughout the emerging American society, the political actions of the pro-nature movement and, as we have already mentioned, the exemplary life and struggle of the pioneers of conservationism allowed for the demarcation of the first American national parks: Yosemite (1864) and Yellowstone (1874). Thus, in order to create these parks, it was crucial that natural and scenic landscapes were part of the narrative of the United States, as an *imaginary community* (Anderson, 1993), that is, a part of the nation's heritage.

As Godoy (2000) reminds us, the creation of Yosemite Park consolidated the belief that the American man was rooted in the natural world. This was God's way of showing the American man's manifest destiny in the New World. Yosemite represented the moral recognition of the American man's moral superiority and the foundation of this emerging nation. Its high peaks and deep valleys, set amidst mining areas, was not in contraposition to the ability to cultivate an unclaimed land and make it cultured. Indeed, it asserted the recognition of human superiority in face of an inhospitable landscape. Godoy (2000, p.136) highlights the romantic origins which lay behind this model of park in the United States, bringing together nature, God and the Nation which are combined to form the founding character of the American man:

This American Renaissance corresponds to the period of American Romanticism which is based on Emersonian ideas in literature, painting, photography, philosophy and the sciences. This movement was underpinned by the certainty that nature was a sacred text available for interpretation. The power of the relationship between God and Nature can be found in the theories of Ralph Waldo Emerson, for whom nature is seen as an omnipotent agent around which all humans beings become satellites. Emerson claims that nature paints the best part of the picture, carves the best part of the statue, builds the best part of the house, writes the best part of the poem and speaks the best part of the oration precisely because it is a law and human acts are based on its strength, because nature is the universal mind: God. The idea that divine objectives are inscribed in nature, that the manifest destiny is found in nature, reflects the conception of the Unity of God and Nation and of the individual in his geographical space, in such a way that the concept of nature and the idea of the American character complement each other.

Godoy describes the ideological, philosophical, aesthetic and social context in which the concept of wilderness and the policy of conservation areas emerged. It is interesting to note the strong religiosity which emerges in the make-up of conservationist thinking. Although the American Revolution resulted in the separation of the State and religion, and religious freedom became a democratic and republican ideal, religion, in its Christian form, is present in the make-up of the American nation as a fountain of moral and aesthetic values for the individual. Thus, it is within this religious and Christian horizon that we locate the origins of ecological thinking and the positive value of nature as an inspiration for an ascetic and communitarian life. Let us recall that our purpose is to draw attention to the transformations and the displacements which occurred in ecological thinking as this religious horizon changed with the emergence of the *spiritualities of the self* and a retreat of transcendent religions in contemporary societies.

The ideals of nature conservation

Nature has been a recurrent topic for academic authors such as Williams (1989), Schama (1996), Shallins (2001), and in particular within a European context, Thomas (1988), all of whom were in some way committed to understanding the social history of human relations with the natural world. For these authors, nature emerges in opposition to the evils of civilization, here identified as the urban-industrial modernity of the West. Good and beautiful nature creates a moral and aesthetic landscape, strongly associated to the authenticity of the wild, the untouchable and the original^{vii}. From a Christian perspective, nature seems to maintain intact the paradisiacal scenario which precedes the fall of man in a world full of contradictions, incompleteness, ills, diseases and ugliness.

According to Godoy (2000), in its scientific narrative, conservation biology re-employs the romantic concept of nature as paradise and as original unity. In this regard, Callicott (2008) highlights the role of ecology as a scientific discipline which emerges in the first half of the 20th century. It played an important role in disseminating the theory that wilderness should not only be protected because of its leisure and/or landscape attributes, but because of its crucial role in relation to the ecosystem and *habitat* of wild species threatened by extinction. Thus, demarcating conservation units may represent a rupture between the human world and nature, as these units gain scientific characteristics. In this way conservation is displaced from its religious horizon and seeks to be re-aligned with a defense for the rational management of nature, based on the scientific principles of moral responsibility for the planet and future generations. From the biological perspective, the same dualism noted by Cronon (1996) is highlighted as in the case of the concept of wilderness, albeit underpinned by different ethical foundations. In both these notions, human beings are situated outside the natural world, so that their presence in this world is in direct conflict with conservationist values and principles.

The desire for an authentic nature, which forces us to preserve wilderness and species threatened by extinction, seems to go hand in hand with the exclusion of humans from nature. Within this context, we consider the dynamics of cognitive-moral and aesthetic-expressive forces found in the dualist experience. The transcendent nature which uplifts, purifies, restores and heals is the same nature from whose core the human world was removed. As Zelizer (2007) noted, the radical contraposition between wilderness and the civilized world in ecological narratives reiterates the hostile and irreconcilable divisions between these two worlds. The “desire for trees and birds” seen through “eyes, tired of civilization” is the poetic expression of this dualism.

Environmentalism in a post-religious society

The critique of radical dualism between nature and culture emerged at the same time as a critique of science as prevailing over religious society. The limits of secularization - seen as the inescapable fate of modern Western society - did not result in the restoration of a modern transcendent religious regime founded on the separation between the sacred and the profane, engendering a radical separation between the natural and supernatural

orders. Instead, it led to a post-modern immanent religious regime assigning itself the task of merging these different spheres. We have argued that ecology, as an imaginative horizon, has had a decisive role in developing a society which has been defined as being post-religious or post-secular. Here *post* is used as a conceptual resource to mark the difference between current society in relation to both the transcendent religious regime, where nature is seen as an *alternative revelation book* of God alongside the Bible, and the rational scientific regime which excludes the experiences of the sacred as a viable way of acquiring knowledge.

Thus, it is interesting to note that in the current discourse in the social sciences, critiques to scientific objectivity exclude experiences of the sacred as a valid field of knowledge. For example, Boaventura Souza Santos (2002) notes that the emergence of a new gnosis is breaking the rationalist scientific paradigm of the natural and human sciences. In his view, it is sort of a return of repressed phenomena which have been transfigured into new forms, among which we could name the object returning as subject and the omnipotent Christian God returning as an immanent ecological God:

[In the natural sciences] the subject returned dressed as the object. In fact, Bateson's concepts of immanent minds, wider minds and collective minds, amongst others, represent dispersed signs that God, which has also been outlawed by science, may be about to return. He will return transfigured, having lost all divine attributes, except for a wish for harmony and communion with everything that surrounds us and which, we now realize, is the closest thing to us. A new gnosis is emerging (SANTOS, 2002, p. 52).

Continuing to evoke Boaventura Santos' allusion of Bateson, this "God which has no divine attributes" leads us to the concept of an "ecological mind" as a way in which the "I" can survive and integrate itself with the immanence of the world. Bateson expanded the concept of mind to include the world and the environment. In this way subjects become part of something bigger, which in his vision is close to what is usually called God, both in religious and modern secular societies (BATESON, 1972, p. 267-468). However, this God is close to the expanded mind and does not correspond to the Christian conception of the transcendent God he criticizes with a touch of irony:

If you place God outside yourself and place Him in relation to creation and you believe that you were created in His image, you will naturally and logically think of yourself as being outside and against the things that surround you. And as you claim all the mind for yourself, you will see the world around you as something mindless and, therefore, not worthy of moral or ethical consideration. The environment may look like it is yours to be explored. Your survival unit will be you and your group against the environment of other social units, other races, animals and vegetation. (BATESON, 1972, p. 468)

Bateson's conception of the expanded mind allows us to reflect more clearly on the divine condition within the post-religious society. That is, it is no longer possible to talk about the return of that God who was suppressed by the hegemony of modern reason. Now we talk about the emergence of another God which is presented as energy and force and expresses itself in the multiple forms of life on the planet. This is the permeable boundary between the "I" and the environment which connects biological and cultural processes. On the other hand, Ingold criticizes Bateson in arguing that we should destroy the idea of boundaries, and consequently, demolish the bridge linking these two poles, in order to think in terms of a continuous line between biology and culture. Thus, where Bateson imagines relations, Ingold sees flows and lines weaving a single thread which he identifies as life. According to Ingold's ecological paradigm, however, and paraphrasing Otávio Velho (2012, p. 228), anthropology "comes close to a philosophy of life, if not to a materialist theology".

Within this perspective we can observe a displacement from relations to the lines along which organisms are made up. For Ingold (2011, p. 31), "human beings are present in the context of stones, just as stones appear within the human context". Thus, there is close coordination between this type of "materialist theology" and the spiritualities of ecological subjects in the post-religious society. They share a common cosmology, focused on life, which encompasses within a single web the diversity of ways of living.

The ecology God within the imaginative horizon of environmentalism

By linking Tim Ingold's materialist thinking to the *spiritualities of the self* our purpose is not to make direct comparisons between these two types of practices and perceptions of reality. Our aim is to point to an epistemic displacement in which a set of beliefs and values starts to make sense within a particular period and for a large number of people. We believe that today, ecological imagination is made up of a persuasive horizon of meanings which approximates fields of human experience and the development of values, meanings and convictions, which only a few years ago were separated by rigid and almost insurmountable boundaries. By analyzing the environmental practices of New Age groups and the spiritual practices of environmental educationalists, we observe a common ground from which these different social fields configure their interpretations of reality and project their imaginary worlds. Following Boaventura Souza Santos (2002) and Otávio Velho (1998), we could call this common ground a new gnosis, or, according to Tim Ingold (2011), a non-adjective anthropology, or even an ecological mind, as coined by Bateson (1972). Whichever name we chose, what is at hand is a critique of the boundaries and divisions established by a modern enlightenment rationale, between humans and non-humans, time and space, experience and narrative, mind and environment. As boundaries become porous, our imagination can build an ideal of "harmony and communion with all that surrounds us and which, as now we understand, is what is closest to us" (SANTOS, 2002, p. 52).

In this context, the experience of peoples and human groups who, outside the hegemonic civilizing process, have remained at one with the environment, has become

emblematic of ideals of harmony and communion. They are an inspiration when reinventing alternative ways of living in the world. In the field of the human sciences, this search for exemplary alternatives occurs by attaching value to the ethnographic characteristics of marginal social groups. In the religious field, this happens by moving toward indigenous and pre-Christian cosmologies and experiences where revelation gives way to possession, conversion to experience and praying to different forms of consciousness. In these cosmologies, the relationship with God does not happen through the mediation of mental representations, but by perceiving energies and materials which we come across or which are part of us. The “ecological God”, like Ingold’s materials in anthropology, does not transcend nature, but is incorporated into the landscape “as wind which comes through the windows of our house and is felt as cold or hot, or light which enters our eyes as objects, or sound which puts us in touch with the door that bangs or music which vibrates within us” (2011, p.47). The transcendent God requires a subject which is constituted as the ‘other’ in opposition to nature and its creatures. By contrast, the ecological God is an absolute part of the environment, merging with the essence of things, places and organisms. From this point of view, the concept of environment as a place inhabited by energies, entities and spirits gives way to the notion of a dynamic and reciprocal engagement among all organisms which live under the same atmosphere^{viii}.

Environmental morals, aesthetics and therapies

The environment is perceived as having a divine meaning in many different ways, in as much as “God” not only inhabits it, but becomes materialized within it as the ideal of moral perfection, the source of well-being and the aesthetic standard for human action. Our ethnographies included experiences such as walking in nature, visits and courses in environmental education conducted in ecologically preserved places, and spiritual tourism to indigenous Andean communities. The narratives of the subjects who took part in these experiences involved moral, therapeutic and aesthetic aspects expressed in a religious language and communicated as *spiritualities of the self*. These involved incorporating habits and practices which considered caring for the environment and the self as a path toward spiritual improvement, requiring discipline, asceticism and the cult of self. They are mobilizing beliefs which, generally speaking, imply a social, aesthetic, ethical and moral repositioning in the world. We frequently found among the most enthusiastic adherents of these activities biographical descriptions which indicated a conversion in terms of habits (food, clothing, etc.), attitudes (less materialistic lifestyles, slower pace, changes in leisure habits, etc.) and social networks (new social belongings). These changes impacted on the lives of these people as they became more committed to ecological practices.

As we have attempted to demonstrate, the attitudes and individual choices of people who live within a secularized urban context are deeply intertwined with an ecological asceticism which affects ways of living and is disseminated as a *zeitgeist*. Therefore, there is a concern with authenticity both within the context of environmental education which incorporates the language of the *spiritualities of the self*, and in New Age organizations which incorporate an ecological ideal. This concern with authenticity is associated to a

return to a sacralized nature as an inexorable source of individual and educational self-improvement, as well as harmony with the environment, either by a virtuous link with the planet or by peaceful co-habitation with other human and non-human beings living under the same atmosphere.

The ideals of ecological well-being are the harbingers of a type of aesthetics, and of ethical and moral values, associated to a reverence of nature. On the other hand, the lack of a dogmatic and moral code revealed by a transcendent God, together with aesthetic standards imposed by a culture of consumption and therapeutic protocols prescribed by conventional medicine, have left a vacuum of rules and meanings which tends to be filled by the personal experience of individuals as part of their biographical trajectory. Therefore, the more the sacred and the environmental are directly experienced without mediation, the more these will be perceived as authentic by the individuals who experience them^x. This search for authenticity is addressed by Gable and Handler (2006, p. 371):

A recurrent vision of modern anxiety is that the world we inhabit is no longer authentic - that is, it has become fake, plastic and kitsch. Anxiety, incorporated as common sense, goes hand in hand with desire. We may have lost authenticity, but we want to find it again and we will pay whatever it will (reasonably) cost to get it back. This image of lost authenticity is at the core of the cultural critique against the modern and this has lent anthropology its romantic aura: the aspiration for lost authenticity. This often makes academic studies of modern and post-modern cultures seem like reverse alchemy. What was gold has turned to plastic.

Ecological imagination is part of this critique against the modern. It is a romantic source of the desire for authenticity which mobilizes the search for alternatives to urban life, characterized by a civilizational discomfort. As an antidote against fast living, anxiety and the superficiality of human relations and the relationship between humans and the environment, a significant number of people have invented alternative forms of existence which respect the rhythm of organisms and take into account the different temporalities of the planet's natural processes. Nature emerges as the opposite of competition, asymmetries, the *status quo* and the social structures which burden daily urban life and human work. This desire for nature, that is, for "trees and birds", which awakens "eyes, dirty from civilization", drives many individuals to engage with ecological practices of environmental education and mythical asceticism, releasing them from consumer goods and comforts and drives them to live in (closed) communities and condominiums, such as eco-villages. Within the academic field a similar movement seems to be motivating anthropologists and researchers from different areas of knowledge to seek different epistemologies and paradigms as an alternative to enlightenment rationality.

Conclusion

In this article we sought to discuss the concept of nature and its origins through the notion of wilderness associated to 19th century American conservationism and liberalism, and how it has been updated within a contemporary *ecological imaginative horizon*. Contemporary subjects share with the pioneers of American conservationism the search for an authentic experience through a direct relationship between the subject and nature. However, the 19th century moral subjects of *wilderness* are not identical to today's ecological-moral subjects, even if they are an inextricable part of a tradition which make the latter possible. The experience of contemporary ecological subjects seems to point to a type of transcendence within immanence closer to the world of New Age type spiritualities. We sought to show how the sacred, evoked as an intrinsic attribute of nature, is today associated to a general displacement of transcendence toward immanence and the mediated experience of an immediate experience of the numinous.

We stress that the values attached to wilderness or pristine nature, both at the individual and the collective level, continue to be an important part of the narrative of restoring the self and the planet by re-establishing the authentic values of natural lives in their most diverse meanings. The experience of being in natural places and carrying out ecological activities and rituals linked to nature, results in educational processes which develop skills^x and re-enforce expectations of authenticity, transcendence, health, well-being, healing of the self and the planet, aesthetic pleasure and moral correctness. At the same time, these educational processes are critical contrapositions to ideas of stress, pollution, illness, reduced quality of life, discomfort, aesthetic degradation and ethical and moral irresponsibility. Educational practices, often conducted in small groups, seek to produce a transformation at an individual level which should not only occur ideologically, but also impact on lifestyles, expressed by specific bodily patterns apprehended from the environment through walking, looking, observing and feeling the place. This "educating the attention" (INGOLD, 2000) suggests a singular style of inhabiting the world, marked by a posture of symmetry and dialogue with other organisms, developing an ecological imagination at the social level. Throughout this article, we have presented some social and historical processes which may be the basis for the emergence of an environmental horizon for interpreting reality and, consequently, educating ecologically-minded contemporary subjects.

It is possible that imaginative ecological horizons will have to account for a number of interpretations and ways of inhabiting the world. Similarly, we could say that environmental education, though in theory aimed at educating ecological subjects for a sustainable society, will not manage to fully educate subjects by molding their intentions and purposes. Just like in the case of *spiritualities of the self*, whose aim is to educate people so that they can live in harmony and communion with nature, environmental education will have to cope with the diversity of ethical foundations which lead to action, as well as take into account human moral weaknesses. The imaginative and creative horizons of subjects are far more open and undetermined than the epistemological models practiced. Similarly, it is possible that the fate of our environment-world is less dependent on our

control and intentions than we imagine. The Earth is made up of flows and lines which can be traced to beyond human agency. Despite the insistence on a fragile image of the Earth in the palms of human hands, as illustrated in environmental text books and events, the world we live in can no longer be represented as a globe which we hold in our hands and look at from outside, as if the future depended on us.

Notes

- i We make use of Thomas Csordas' (1997) distinction between Christian religions based on the transcendence of a God outside the world and the religions of the self, typically New Age spiritualities characterized by the immanence of a God which is manifested through energies and forces.
- ii Here we refer to studies carried out around the "*cult of self*" project in *ecological and sacred landscapes*.
- iii *Sanctuary* has been used as a category by Privately Owned Nature Reserves (RPPN), for example, in the case of the Flor das Águas Wildlife Sanctuary (Pirenópolis, in the Brazilian state of Goiás - GO) and the Riacho Fundo Wildlife Sanctuary, in the Federal District - DF, Brazil.
- iv The New Age concept has been extensively discussed by the authors we drew on in developing our analysis. We refer to studies by Amaral (1996, 1998), Heelas (1996), Carozzi (1999), D'Andrea (1996) and Soares (1994).
- v Report from January 2012 disseminated by the Brazilian Network on Environmental Education (Rebea) on environmental network websites. (VII FBEA, 2012).
- vi Henry Thoreau is an important reference within ecological thinking and considered to be one of the founders of contemporary environmentalism.
- vi Sahlins (2001) reiterates the convergence between ecological and romantic ideals. Both these ways of life are linked to the earth and to subsistence, in apparent communion with nature. They both provide evidence of an authorized critique of Western society.
- viii See Ingold's (2011) critique of the sociological interpretation of animist and fetishist thinking, according to which objects and bodies are inhabited by a force which emanates from them, as *mana*.
- ix In this way, mediation institutions such as churches and the classic forms of political action in the world (State, party, unions and so on) tend to become less central to the *spiritualities of the self* and in building an *ecologic habitus*.
- x On the concept of skills see Ingold (2000) and Milton (2002). For the authors, skills guide individuals to move and position themselves efficiently in the world, recognizing others, and being able to perceive their spiritual state and intentions.

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NATURE AND ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION: THE GOD OF ECOLOGY WITHIN THE IMAGINATIVE HORIZON OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

ISABEL CRISTINA DE MOURA CARVALHO, CARLOS ALBERTO STEIL

Resumo: Este artigo discute as expectativas de felicidade e elevação moral atribuídas à natureza, no contexto secular contemporâneo, e suas implicações para as práticas educativas ambientais que se baseiam no contato direto com ambientes naturais. Situa a gênese do valor moral da natureza pristina (*wilderness*) no ideário conservacionista norte-americano do século XIX e argumenta que o sujeito conservacionista-moral do *wilderness*, associado ao contexto democrático-liberal do século XIX, corrobora, na atualidade, com a noção de natureza boa e bela, tomada como lugar da autenticidade e da transcendência. Contudo, isso não significa uma simples repetição dos ideais do século XIX. O ideal de virtude ecológica contemporânea aciona e transforma esta noção de natureza, agenciando parte dessa inspiração do século XIX às novas configurações do eixo secularização e transcendência a partir das espiritualidades da imanência do tipo Nova Era.

Palavras-chave: Natureza; Transcendência; Imanência; Educação ambiental.

Abstract : This article discusses the expectations of happiness and moral elevation we place on nature in the present secular context and the implications for environmental education practices based on direct contact with natural ecosystems. It locates the origins of the moral value of wilderness in the American conservationist ideals of the nineteenth century and argues that, currently, this subject-moral, associated with the liberal-democratic context of the nineteenth century, corroborates with the perception of nature as a place of virtue and beauty. However, this does not mean a simple reiteration of nineteenth century ideals. The paradigm of contemporary ecological virtue recovers and transforms this notion of nature, combining nineteenth century inspirations with a new axis of secularization and transcendence within the context of immanent spiritualities such as New Age.

Keywords: wilderness, transcendence, immanence; environmental education.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza las expectativas de felicidad y elevación moral atribuidas a la naturaleza, en el contexto secular contemporáneo, y sus implicaciones para las prácticas de educación ambiental que se basan en el contacto directo con los ambientes naturales. Ubica la génesis del valor moral de la naturaleza pristina (desierto) en los ideales conservacionistas norteamericanos del siglo XIX, y sostiene que el sujeto-moral del

conservacionismo, asociado con el contexto democrático-liberal del siglo XIX, corrobora, en la actualidad, con la idea de naturaleza como lugar de la autenticidad, de la bondad y de la trascendencia. Sin embargo, esto no significa una simple repetición de los ideales del siglo XIX. El ideal contemporáneo de la virtud ecológica incorpora y transforma la noción de naturaleza, articulando parte de esa inspiración del siglo XIX con a las nuevas configuraciones de la secularización y de la trascendencia en el contexto de las espiritualidades de la inmanencia de tipo de la Nueva Era.

Palabras clave: Naturaleza; Trascendencia; Inmanencia; Educación ambiental
