

## THE FELT SENSE OF NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS

---

*Herbert W. Schroeder*

---

### INTRODUCTION

I am an environmental psychologist working in a research unit of the United States Forest Service. The researchers in our office are all social scientists who study how people interact with natural environments. Our goal is to provide information and tools to support natural resource managers and policymakers in planning, designing, and managing environments with people in mind.

As an environmental psychologist, my research has looked in various ways at how people perceive, experience, and value natural environments. When I began my career, I mainly used quantitative methods to measure people's preferences for environments and to model how objective features of environments, like the numbers and sizes of trees of different species, influence preferences. This was often a useful approach, but after a while I began to feel as if this analytical approach was leaving out something important. I knew both from my own experience and from accounts by other people that there are deeper emotional and intuitive responses to natural environments that go far beyond simple preference. At that time, there was a growing recognition in the forest management and research community that this kind of experience matters to many people and needs to be recognized in the environmental decision-making process. I became interested in understanding the deeper, hard-to-define experiences and values that people find in nature, which go by names like "spiritual values" and "sense of place". In doing this, I began to shift from using quantitative, statistical methods to a more qualitative approach in doing my research.

It was around this time that I was in a book store and came across a copy of Gene Gendlin's book, *Focusing* (1981). I was immediately attracted to it and began to use Focusing as a way of working with issues in my personal life. Several years later, I began to realize that Gendlin's ideas and methods were also very relevant to my research on environmental psychology.

### FOCUSING ON THE EXPERIENCE OF NATURE

One of my colleagues, Charles Lewis, was a horticulturist at the Morton Arboretum near our office in the Chicago area. He was conducting sessions with art students to help them become more aware of how they experienced the landscapes they were painting at the Arboretum. His procedure was based on a discovery that he made by observing his own experience of the environment. He found that when he paid careful attention to how he felt in the center of his body as he walked through the Arboretum, he could discern a subtle, visceral change as he moved from one place to another. He could actually feel the difference in the landscape, in the form of what he called an "inner tug". By teaching the art students to

tune into their bodies' subtle, physical responses to the environment, they became better able to select the settings they wanted to paint, and their paintings reflected a deeper appreciation for the setting (Lewis, 1996).

It occurred to me that Charles (who had never heard of Gene Gendlin or Focusing) had independently discovered an environmental version of a *felt sense*. By paying attention to the felt sense of the environment and noticing how the felt sense changed as they moved between environments, Charles and the art students were able to gain insight into their preferences for different kinds of landscapes. You can try this for yourself. Notice if you can feel a difference in the center of your body when, for example, you move from being in a room indoors to being outside under the sky, or when you walk from a dense thicket of trees into a wide open meadow. You may be able to discern a visceral shift just by gazing at photographs of different kinds of landscapes, or even by vividly imagining yourself being in different environments that you have experienced in the past.

Intrigued by Charles' discovery, I decided to try an experiment of my own. On a visit to the Morton Arboretum one spring day, I tried using Gendlin's six Focusing steps with my felt sense of the environment as I walked through various outdoor natural settings. As I reported in an early issue of *The Folio* (Schroeder, 1990), focusing on the felt sense of the Arboretum environment led me to a clearer awareness of how and why natural environments have value for me. Starting from a feeling of fascination with a particular environmental feature (a chorus of frogs), I was led to a sense of rightness — a feeling that “this is where I belong”. This developed into an experience of relief and profound serenity. In the absence of stress and pressure, I had an inward, bodily sense of myself expanding out into space, as though the boundary separating myself from my environment had become relaxed and permeable. After this initial experience with Focusing in nature, I continued to explore the felt senses of places where I enjoy hiking and spending time outdoors. I discovered that the combination of serenity with an inward sense of expansion (which I call *inwardly opening-out* or *i.o.o.*) is a characteristic feature of my experience of natural environments.

Rather than explicitly using the 6 steps from Gendlin's Focusing book, as I did the first time at the Morton Arboretum, I have developed a more free-form approach to focusing on the felt sense of environments. When I am in a natural environment, I pay attention to what I am feeling inside and how that is affected by my surroundings. I almost always notice a definite change in my feelings after I have spent a little while in a natural place. I try to observe what is happening inside me and then sense what it is about the environment and situation that is bringing forth such a change. I sometimes then have openings of insight into how and why a natural environment enables this change to occur. I find words or phrases that express these insights and check them against the felt sense to see if there is a resonance or response that confirms the rightness of that way of expressing the insight. Sometimes this develops into a kind of mini-theory that both explains and carries forward my sense of nature and how I respond inwardly to natural surroundings. The experience often seems to unfold through a series of steps or insights, which I try to remember so that I can write them down later. Sometimes I carry a notebook or a tape recorder with me so that I can keep a record of the experience as it is occurring. This process often leads to a heightened sense of delight, gratitude, and appreciation for the natural environment.

## A TAE THEORY OF RELATING TO NATURE

By means of this process, I have been able to explore and unfold some of the ‘edges’ in my experience of nature and to begin understanding why experiences like serenity and *i.o.o.* occur more often for me in natural settings than in built or urban environments. Here, briefly, are three examples of insights that have emerged from focusing on my felt sense of serenity and *i.o.o.* in natural places:

- *This is where I belong.* In natural places I have a feeling of rightness, of fitting in perfectly, of there being no conflict, tension, or pressure at the interface between me and my surroundings. There is no need for defensiveness, no need to push away or separate myself from what is around me. There is a sense of continuity and compatibility between me and the environment that invites me to let go and relax into my experience of nature.
- *Nothing needs to be done.* The environment is self-sufficient. It does not need me to do anything for it and does not demand any particular action or response on my part. The living things around me form a system that functions on its own, without me having to manage or maintain it. I can be at rest, because the environment is able to take care of itself.
- *Nature as an egoless other.* The natural things around me have no egos, no sense of themselves as socially defined selves. Therefore, they do not engage the part of my mind that is concerned with social norms, expectations, goals, and projects. In the midst of egoless nature, I am able to rest from the ongoing effort and tension of being an ego among other egos in the human, social world.

These insights all seem to have something in common. They are like variations on a theme. That is, they all seem to stem from an underlying, implicit sense of how the experience of serenity and *i.o.o.* arises in response to a natural environment. Several years ago I attended the Focusing Institute’s Thinking at the Edge workshop and began to formulate a theory for this underlying theme.

Thinking at the Edge (TAE) is an experiential practice for constructing theories that speak from a person’s implicit, felt sense of an area of interest (Hendricks, 2004). My TAE theory began with the paradoxical notion that human beings are at the same time both part of nature and separate from nature. In Western culture, nature has often been regarded as a realm existing apart from human beings — an original, pristine paradise in which human beings are intruders and despoilers. In recent years, however, postmodern scholars have ‘deconstructed’ this concept of nature, claiming that the distinction between natural and artificial environments is socially constructed and therefore has no objective basis. From this viewpoint, human cultures and natural systems are not separate domains. Human activity and human-influenced environments are as much a part of nature as the caribou’s migration and the beavers’ building of dams. On the one hand, I can see that there is some validity in this argument. On the other hand, I feel uneasy about attempts to abolish the human-nature distinction from our thinking about the environment. While intellectually I agree that humans and their works are in some sense part of nature, I also know from my own

experience that there is a profound shift in how I feel when I am in a natural setting. I sense that something important is lost by denying that there is any difference between natural and human-influenced environments.

In my TAE theory, I try to find a way to say how we humans are a part of nature while, at the same time, we make ourselves separate from nature. The key terms in the theory are *intrinsic process*, *imposed patterns*, and (felt) *space*. By intrinsic process I mean things moving and carrying forward in their own way. We humans have (or are) intrinsic process, like all other living beings, and in that sense we are part of nature. But we also separate ourselves from nature by imposing human patterns on the intrinsic process in our environment and in ourselves. Imposed patterns constrain the ways in which intrinsic process can move. The way in which intrinsic process moves within me registers in my awareness as a felt sense of space. When my intrinsic process is able to move freely, I experience a sense of space that is open and expansive. When my intrinsic process is constrained, my felt sense of space registers as constricted and confined.

I make a basic distinction between *doing* and *being* as ways of relating to the environment. Doing is the imposing of patterns. In doing, I am trying to shape or mold the environment according to a pattern that does not arise from the intrinsic process of the environment itself. Imposing patterns on intrinsic process requires work. It takes mental and physical effort to override the intrinsic process of the environment and to maintain the human patterns that we impose upon it. In *being*, I simply experience the environment as it is, without trying to impose my patterns on it. When my way of relating to the environment shifts from doing to being, I experience relaxation and serenity because I need not maintain the effort of shaping or molding the environment to my patterns. The intrinsic process of the environment carries forward on its own, without any effort on my part.

We impose human patterns not only on the environment, but also on the intrinsic process within ourselves. We constantly impose patterns on ourselves and on other people, based on our conceptual systems, interpersonal expectations, social norms, and personal goals and projects. Discursive thinking plays a key role in creating and maintaining these human patterns in our own minds and in our interactions with other people. As a social being, my intrinsic process is continually constrained by patterns imposed by other people and by my own discursive thinking. When I am interacting with other people or perceiving human-made patterns in the environment, discursiveness and socially imposed patterns are reinforced. But in a natural environment this discursiveness and social patterning are absent. Non-discursive nature does not evoke or reinforce the discursive, 'doing' side of my mind. Thus, a natural environment facilitates the shift from doing into being. My intrinsic process is released from the constraints of social patterns, and my mind can take a rest from the effort of imposing patterns on myself and others.

My inward, intrinsic process *resonates* with the environment in an intricate way. By this I mean that the environment plays a vital role in determining how my inward process can carry forward while, at the same time, my intrinsic process implies the kind of environment that it needs in order to carry forward freely. When I am in an environment that enables my intrinsic process to carry forward in its own way, there is no sense of conflict or incompatibility between me and the environment. Such an environment enables my intrinsic

process to move in ways consistent with its own intrinsic tendencies; hence I feel a sense of fitting in perfectly and being in the place where I belong. For me, this experience of fitting in occurs most often in natural environments, where the intrinsic process of the environment is not obscured or molded by imposed human patterns. The absence of humanly imposed patterns in a natural environment allows the intrinsic process in me to resonate with the intrinsic process of the environment. This registers in my awareness as a sense of opening and expanding — taking me out of my socially-constructed self, out of the human world, and into a wider, more expansive felt space. This is the experience of inwardly-opening-out that I described earlier.

When human patterns are imposed on a natural environment, they alter or obscure the intrinsic process of the environment to a greater or lesser degree. My inward intrinsic process is then no longer able to resonate with the intrinsic process of the environment but, instead, becomes engaged with the human patterns that obscure that process. This engagement with humanly imposed patterns constrains my inward process from being able to carry forward freely. As a result, I experience a sense of constriction in my felt sense of space.

This is not to say that we humans should never impose our patterns on natural environments. Obviously, there is often great value in imposing our patterns on nature. After all, pattern-imposing (doing) is an essential aspect of the human creative process. In distinguishing between doing and being, I do not intend to imply that one of these modes of relating is inherently better than the other.

If we are not too heavy-handed, then the intrinsic process of nature may still show through in an environment where human patterns are imposed to some degree. For example, a garden is a place where human patterns have been imposed and yet the intrinsic process of nature is still visible through and within those patterns. But when we impose our human patterns on an environment to such an extent that the intrinsic process of nature is completely obscured (for example, a totally enclosed, artificial environment), then all that remains for us to relate to in that environment is our own patterns. We then inhabit a self-contained sphere, consisting only of the products of human thought and action. Our relating to the environment becomes a closed loop, in which we can only engage with patterns that we ourselves have created. Our awareness has no opportunity to open out into a larger, non-human world. This, in terms of my TAE theory, is how we separate ourselves from nature.

## **EXPERIENTIAL THEORIES**

I see some points of contact or similarity between my TAE theory and conventional scientific accounts of the human-nature relationship in my professional field. For example, one well-known theory says that natural environments foster mental restoration because they allow people to recover from directed attention fatigue (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). According to this theory, directed attention is the mental faculty that enables us to screen out distractions and focus our attention on the task at hand. When this faculty becomes fatigued through overuse, we experience various kinds of mental and behavioral dysfunction. The Kaplans' theory says that natural features of environments are inherently fascinating, so our attention is drawn to them involuntarily without any effort on our part. This allows the

faculty of directed attention to rest and be restored when we are in a natural setting. In terms of my TAE theory, I would say that directed attention is characteristic of the effortful doing mode of relating to the environment. Fascination and involuntary attention, on the other hand, seem to involve the being mode of resonating with the intrinsic process of nature. Crossing my theory with that of the Kaplans might open up new avenues for developing each of these theories in light of the other.

One important way in which my theory differs from that of the Kaplans (and from most other scientific theories in my field) is that it was derived by sensing into my own personal experience of the subject matter, instead of by collecting data about other people and things. In other words, my theory is an instance of first-person science (Gendlin and Johnson, 2004). Another important difference is that the terms in my theory make direct reference to aspects of my own experience. That is, my theory is not only derived from my own experience; it is also about my own experience. I call theories with this characteristic *experiential theories*.

Not all TAE theories are experiential theories in this sense, but TAE appears to be an especially effective method for developing experiential theories. At a recent conference of recreation researchers, I presented a paper advocating the use of first-person science and experiential theories in recreation research (Schroeder, 2007, 2008a). In this presentation I gave an example of an experiential theory of what it means to be on vacation, which draws on some of the same themes as my TAE theory of relating to nature (for example space, freedom, and imposed forms).

The terms in an experiential theory stand in a direct and ongoing relationship with the first-person experience that the theory is about. Such a theory not only describes the researcher's experience; it also changes the experience in a particular way. The way in which the theory evokes, resonates with, and carries forward the researcher's experience is an important indicator of the validity of the theory. Thus, an experiential theory can never be separated from the experience that it is about. If the terms of the theory do lose their interactive contact with the actual experience, then the theory is no longer an experiential theory.

I do not advocate completely replacing conventional scientific theories and methods with first-person science. I do, however, think that experiential theories could be a useful addition to research on topics like recreation and environmental perception, where the subject matter has obvious experiential aspects.

## **THE CONCEPT OF VALUE**

My experience with Gendlin's experiential practices and my reading of *A Process Model* (Gendlin, 1997) have led me to rethink one of the basic concepts in my field from a first-person perspective. The concept of *value* is both one of the most important and one of the most confusing concepts in the domain of natural resource management. Different disciplines define and use the word "value" in different ways in theory and practice. Two of the most common ways of defining value are known as *held value* and *assigned value* (Brown, 1984). Held value is defined as an enduring conception of what is good or preferable, while

assigned value is defined as the expressed worth (in words or behavior) of one thing relative to another. For example, the belief that one should protect and preserve natural environments is a held value, while the price that one is willing to pay to visit a National Park is an assigned value.

Scientists in the field of natural resources often assume that held values are the basis for assigned values. In other words, these scientists believe that behavioral choices and preferences are determined by concepts of what is good, right, or desirable. I see two troublesome implications in this way of looking at value. First, by assuming that values originate in conceptual thought, this view downplays the importance of feeling in human preference and choice. Research focuses on how people's cognitive beliefs about what is good or bad influence their behavior and choices. Feeling is seen as merely a side-effect of conceptual thought, hence feeling is often ignored in research, theory, and practice relating to natural resource values. Second, this view implies that only human beings can have values, because only humans are capable of conceptual thought. If concepts about what is good or bad are the basis of value, then the behavior of non-human species who do not think conceptually can only be seen as mechanistic and purposeless, rather than as directed by values. This way of understanding value reinforces the belief that humans are fundamentally different from and superior to all other living things, which in turn has implications for environmental ethics and the treatment of non-human species.

Drawing on Gendlin's (1997) *Process Model*, I have developed a different way of understanding value. From my own experience of Focusing in natural places, I know that the value of an environment involves not only concepts of what is good or desirable (held values) and verbal or behavioral expressions of worth (assigned values), but also an immediate *feeling* of the importance of the environment. Therefore, I have added a third definition to the two existing definitions of held value and assigned value. I define *felt value* as the immediate, felt sense of worth or importance that something has for someone (Schroeder, 2004, 2008b). Felt value is the implicit side of held value and assigned value. Held values and assigned values are explicit concepts and actions that arise from and carry forward felt value in the same way that appropriate words or actions carry forward felt senses in general.

I have come to see value as a *process* that has its basis in our implicit, bodily relatedness to the world instead of in abstract concepts about what is good. All living beings have this bodily world-relatedness and therefore all living beings, not just humans, have valuing as an aspect of their basic life process (Schroeder, 2006). Abstract concepts of what is good or bad (held values) are a uniquely human development, which has emerged from the more fundamental process of valuing that we share with all other living things. This process-oriented perspective on valuing acknowledges both the ways in which human beings are similar to other living things and the important ways in which we are unique.

The process of valuing is closely tied to decision-making and choice. Therefore, a shift in our understanding of the concept of value has practical consequences for the process by which environmental management decisions are made. Decision-making approaches in the field of environmental management often ignore or pass over the implicit, felt dimension of value, and instead seek to make decisions by means of rational, mathematical models. Felt value plays no direct role in this kind of decision-making approach. Instead, value is treated

as an abstract quantity, and decisions are reached by carrying out numerical calculations on a computer. This is a good method for some purposes, but it often fails to deal adequately with the complex feelings, perceptions, and meanings inherent in people's relationships to the environments and places in which they live, work, and recreate.

In the field of environmental management, complex people-place relationships have been subsumed under the name "sense of place". I am presently writing a chapter for a book on sense of place and decision-making, in which I argue that sense of place is in fact a *felt* sense of place. Hence, to include sense of place in environmental decision-making requires that the decision-making process not by-pass, ignore, or lose touch with the felt value of places. The participants in decision-making need a means for directly connecting with and drawing upon their implicit, felt level of experience as decisions about places are being made. Using practices like Focusing and Collaborative Edge Decision Making (McGuire, 2007) in an environmental decision process could help those involved in decision-making to stay in touch with felt value, so that a decision that respects everybody's sense of place might be sought (Schroeder, 2008b).

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have summarized the ways in which Eugene Gendlin's experiential psychology and philosophy of the implicit have influenced my thinking and my work in environmental psychology. I think that environmental psychology and experiential psychology can both benefit from a crossing of ideas and methods between these two fields.

On the one hand, much environmental psychology research has been carried out from the detached stance of natural science, in which the researcher seeks to be an objective, uninvolved observer and analyst of the interactions between people and their environments. Experiential psychology and the philosophy of the implicit open a doorway into the first-person, experiential dimension. They remind me that, as an environmental psychology researcher, I am not only an observer but also an instance of what I observe. Each of us has within us the bodily world-relatedness that underlies human interactions with environments. Experiential practices like Focusing give us direct access to an awareness of this implicit domain, enabling us to ground our theories about values and perceptions of natural environments in a first-hand knowledge of our own ongoing relationship to the environment.

On the other hand, paying attention to the felt sense of the immediately perceived environment introduces a new dimension to experiential practices like Focusing and TAE. You can explore this for yourself by Focusing not only on your thoughts and feelings about nature in the abstract, but on the felt sense that arises from your immediate, perceptual contact with an environment while you are actually in it. When you attend to the intricate feelings evoked by sensory contact with the environment — the sound of the wind blowing through pine branches, the warmth of the sun on your face, the pattern of ripples on the surface of a pond, the smell of summer rain, the soaring arc of a bird's flight against a background of slowly shifting clouds — your body's ongoing, implicit engagement with its

physical surroundings may become a source of (perhaps surprising) insights into how you are related to the world in which you live.

Focusing on the felt senses of environments has made me acutely aware that there is a radical difference in how I experience artificial and natural environments. Natural environments carry my inward felt process forward in ways that artificial environments do not. It seems to me that there are facets of my life process that remain stopped in artificial environments and that resume only when I return to a natural place — a place where the intrinsic process of the environment carries forward, unconstrained by imposed human patterns. Why my own intrinsic process resonates with the intrinsic process of nature in this way is still something of a mystery to me. Exploring this mystery is a continuing source of fascination and delight.

## REFERENCES

- Brown, T. C. (1984). The concept of value in resource allocation. *Land Economics*, 60, 231-246.
- Gendlin, E. T. (1981). *Focusing*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Gendlin, E. T. (1997). *A process model*. New York: The Focusing Institute.
- Gendlin, E. T., and Johnson, D. H. (2004). *Proposal for an international group for a first person science*. Retrieved July 21, 2008, from [http://www.focusing.org/gendlin\\_johnson\\_iscience.html](http://www.focusing.org/gendlin_johnson_iscience.html).
- Hendricks, M. N. (Ed.). (2004). Thinking at the edge: A new philosophical practice [Special issue]. *The Folio. A Journal for Focusing and Experiential Therapy*.19(1).
- Kaplan, R., and Kaplan, S. (1989). *The experience of nature: A psychological perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, C. A. (1996). *Green nature/human nature: The meaning of plants in our lives*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- McGuire, K. (2007). *Collaborative edge decision making*. Retrieved July 21, 2008, from <http://www.cefocusing.com/freedownloads/CollaborativeEdgearticleFinal.pdf>.
- Schroeder, H. W. (1990). The felt sense of natural environments. *The Folio*, 9(2), 59-67.
- Schroeder, H. W. (2004, June). *Experiencing the value of natural environments*. Presentation at the Environmental Design Research Association Annual Conference. Albuquerque, NM.
- Schroeder, H. W. (2006, October). *Valuing nature: Experience, process, and practice*. Presentation at the Society for Human Ecology Annual Conference. Bar Harbor, ME.
- Schroeder, H. W. (2007, September). A role for first person science in recreation research: Excerpted from a presentation at the 2007 Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium. *Staying in Focus: The Focusing Institute Newsletter*, pp. 1-3, 11.

Schroeder, H. W. (2008a). A role for first-person science in recreation research. In D. Klenosky, C. Vogt, and C. LeBlanc (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2007 Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium* (General Technical Report NRS-P-23, pp 244-249). Newtown Square, PA: U. S. Forest Service, Northern Research Station.

Schroeder, H. W. (2008b, June). *Sensing value in place: Felt value and the land-use decision-making process*. Presentation at the International Symposium on Society and Resource Management. Burlington, VT.

---

*Herbert Schroeder is a research social scientist with the Northern Research Station of the United States Forest Service in Evanston, Illinois.*

