This transcript accompanies the *Cambridge in your Classroom* video on 'How can we be close to nature?'.
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How can we be close to nature?

Dr Simone Kotva,
Faculty of Divinity

Hello, I'm Simone Kotva, an Affiliated Lecturer at the Faculty of Divinity here at the University of Cambridge. I work on ecology, religion and magic and today, I wanted to talk to you briefly about what it means to be close to nature. What does closeness entail? What practices, expressions and forms of life does it correspond to? And what do we mean when we talk about nature?

So how can we be close to nature? Well, there are many ways in which to be close to nature. The main way, and the one that is often encouraged, and talked about, is this idea of spending more time in wild, remote and beautiful places. But just because we are outside the city and among animals and trees, does this mean that we are learning, necessarily, to be more attentive to the environment? - and attentiveness is what people mean usually, when they talk about what it is to be close to nature.

So, let's say I visit a nature reserve in order to get closer to nature. And let's say I live in the city. So, to get to the reserve I have to catch a bus and then a train. Both these modes of transport involve using energy, most of it fossil-fuel based. This has an adverse effect on the environment, although I may not see it from my train window.

What I mean is, the effects won't be directly visible to me. What I may see is road kill which is caused directly by the traffic shuttling me to the nature reserve. And then there is my presence in the reserve itself. By visiting it, I encourage others to visit it, and in this way I further endanger the species which the reserve is meant to protect.

So, in this scenario, although I am making an effort to be close to nature by visiting a nature reserve, I am not actually being very attentive to wildlife. In fact, you could say that my actions are having counterproductive rebound effects on the environment. And, ultimately, those effects will make nature less and not more close to me and my life.

So, it's as if attention to nature, this desire to be attentive to it is actually distancing me from the place that I want to engage with.

Now this seems like a double bind: if I make an attempt to spend more time in nature, I inadvertently damage it. But if I stay in the city, I'm distancing myself from 'nature', right?

But nature is not something that exists in nature reserves only. The name here is misleading. Think about it: nature isn't a thing out there – it really can't be, since everything on the planet derives from material found on the planet.

So if there is such a thing as 'nature', it is the whole interconnected web of everything that exists on this planet. That includes birds and trees, things that you would expect to find in a nature reserve and things that nature reserves are meant to protect. But it also includes sewers and garbage dumps and townhouses. This is all nature, which means that being close to it is not something you go out and do, it is something you already are. You just have to discover in what way.

Which means that if I live in a city, and I want to be close to nature, then the more responsible thing I can do is become more attentive to my immediate environment: spend more time learning about how my local sewer works, for instance, or campaigning for my local council to turn their landfill dump into a biogas plant.

Still, though, the idea of nature 'out there' is difficult to get rid of. That's because we are thinking in a paradigm that separates nature from culture. Culture is what humans make and nature is what nonhumans make.

On this model, a city is an unnatural environment because it is made by humans, meaning that in order to get close to nature we have to leave the city.

But that way of thinking about nature, as something that's opposed to culture, is not the only the way, and historically it's quite recent.

We see it emerging in Western thinking during the early modern period, so roughly around the sixteenth century. It becomes really common during the Enlightenment, so at the very end of the eighteenth century. But in, what's called, pre-modern philosophy, things were quite different.

Early Christianity, for instance did not make this hard distinction between nature and culture. Observing that bees, like humans, construct their habitats in intricate ways, early Christians tended to see nature made up of many different and varied forms of 'cultural' activity that were not restricted to humans. So, on this idea, bees have their own culture distinct from human culture, but not entirely separated.

And there are many other religious communities that see the world in similar ways. So the one I am going to talk about briefly are the Sámi in northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia.

Who are the Sámi? The Sámi are a group of semi-nomadic peoples who traditionally herd and farm reindeer for a living. They arrived in the Arctic long before Christianity did, and their way of life is influenced by pre-Christian practices. Today Sámi culture combines Christian belief, which they'd adopted during the eighteenth century, with older, animistic ways of life.

Animism describes a way of interacting with the environment that recognises the liveliness and personality of all things, not only humans and animals, but stones, trees and water as well. Traditionally, the Sámi live very close to nature and yet

they don’t think about it in quite those terms, as a place to which they are ‘close’ or ‘distant’.

The meaning of the word 'Sámi' has been lost to history, but one suggestion is that it comes from a word meaning 'land' or 'place'. And this would fit very well with the way in which the Sámi historically have identified their culture with the land on which they live.

Now, in another example, and one I want to introduce you to in this talk – an example of the way in which nature and culture are not clearly separated in the Sámi way of life – can be found in historical records of the Sámi ritual drum.

So, the Sámi ritual drum was traditionally used in healing ceremonies and for divination. It was often painted with a map of the local environment, as you can see on this South Sámi frame drum. So around the edge and clustered around the centre you see all the different parts of the Sámi environment: plants and animals, but you also see houses, boats and tools, and of course humans.

Together all these images form a map of the environment, meaning that a person looking at the drum would be able to recognise familiar features of their day-to-day life. At the same time, the fact that the map is circular makes it quite different from a geographical map, or a map that one would use for navigating. So, for this reason, some scholars have described the Sámi drum as a cognitive, rather than as a geographical, map.

So, a geographical map is meant to show where things are located on a specific place on the earth – geos means 'earth' – hence 'geographical map'. A cognitive map, by contrast, shows how its creators thought about the world, how they imagined it and experienced it – cognition is another word for 'thinking'.

In particular, a cognitive map shows us how the creator of this very drum thought about the entanglement of humans and nonhumans. So, have a look at that drum again. By allowing animals, boats and tools to jostle together, the map shows very clearly how nothing is in reality isolated from anything else. That truth would have been lost had the creator of the drum attempted to follow the conventions of the geographical map.

What is emphasised on the Sámi drum are the connections between things, rather than their separation. As a result, there is no clear separation between nature and culture on this drum.

Now, religious beliefs, such as those of the Sámi, often express ways of living that can help us to challenge common assumptions about the meaning of 'nature' and 'culture' today. Ways of living are in turn practices that are repeated until they become habitual. What I'm interested in here is what are the practices – what techniques of looking, of interacting with the environment – made that drum possible?

In the online material accompanying this video I have outlined one such practice for you to experiment with. It's a practice based on the idea of a cognitive map, rather than on the Sámi ritual drum itself, which belongs to a specific cultural and religious context. And the exercise explores alternative ways of being closer to nature by using the practice of making your own cognitive map.