

Originalni naučni rad
UDK 502.1:719(061.1)
316.64:502.1

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NATURE AS A PLACE: CONSTRUCTING NATURAL SITES IN UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE LIST*

Abstract: The idea of a physical space, unaffected by human action as something worthy of admiration, underlies the concept of natural sites. This paper argues that UNESCO's natural landscapes are as socially constructed (artifacts) as tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and that the processes of protection contaminate the fundamental premise of the nature intactness. I will apply several analytical tools developed throughout the history of the discipline, concerning the anthropology of place and space and environmental anthropology, to the definitions and regulations that UNESCO has created in relation to nature and natural sites. The goal of this research is to contribute to a better understanding of the use of the notion of nature in the construction of a universal value system and the global political implications of such values.

Keywords: nature, natural sites, UNESCO, culture, environment, anthropology of space;

Nature as a place

The term nature encompasses several ideas. The root of the word¹ is considered to be *natus* or *gnatus*, which is Latin for “being born” or “produced.” Nature is anything that has been generated and comes into being (Rolston 1997, 41). In Greek philosophy, the theological and scientific term *physis* (Bolhari

* Realizaciju ovog istraživanja finansijski je podržalo Ministarstvo nauke, tehnološkog razvoja i inovacija Republike Srbije u sklopu finansiranja naučnoistraživačkog rada na Univerzitetu u Beogradu – Filozofskom fakultetu (broj ugovora 451-03-47/2023-01/ 200163).

1 An in-depth examination of the origins, etymology, and historical semantics of this word and its different meanings in contemporary European languages can be found in Ducarme & Couvet (2020).

Ghehi 2021) can refer to the following: (1) the nature of something, (2) all things that generate themselves, and (3) reality as a whole (Röck, 2016). In a similar way, Williams (1980) describes three meanings of nature that are closely intertwined, and those are: (1) the essential quality or character of something, (2) the inherent force which directs the world, (3) the external, material world itself (reality of totality). If we consider nature to be a place, we are relying on the third meaning, but the first two are always somewhat implied, and they carry the potential of nature to be recognized as a determinant of value systems.

Aristotle described *physis* as a mixture of matter and energy (Thayer 1975), which can be connected to the Cartesian understanding, once accepted in the social sciences, that a human being is composed of body and mind, and finally that culture is material and non-material (Biswas 2015). All of this has been challenged during the last century, as such distinctions have been destabilized and these components unified. Thus, nature can be seen either as an entity separate from culture and human intervention (just a primary setting) or it can include humans and constitute this broad term that denotes almost everything. In the second sense, humans are part of nature and therefore everything they do is also natural. Wickson (2008) argues that if we take the first meaning literally, we might find that there is no nature at all², but if we accept the following idea, which includes mankind – the concept becomes panchreston (Simberloff 2014), or “so all-encompassing as to be practically useless” (Wickson 2008, 456).

Nature as a place is an idea that arises mainly from the concept of separate entity, since one must go “there” to be “in it”. If we were to accept that everything around us, including ourselves, is nature, we could not move back and forth from it. The widely used terms “spending time in nature” and “connecting with nature” show that this negative definition³ is prevalent worldwide. In this discourse, the term “nature” is used almost exclusively as a synonym for the term wilderness, or non-cultivated area, but with a positive connotation. The phrase “spend time in nature” implies the existence of locations that are not natural and whose artificiality is usually considered unhealthy for the people who spend time in them. It is also interesting to think that the environment that humans have created to protect themselves by creating barriers against the cruel conditions of the immediate natural world is now seen as being bad for them. Cities, and the urban environment in general, are locations that are antithetical to natural sites. Increased human activity has made urban spaces as dangerous as wild and feral natural spaces used to be. Thus, the conclusion can be drawn that even if humans and nature were once one entity the activity of humans and artificiality are taking them away from their true nature.

2 Rolston (1997, 39) explained it in the following manner: “Apparently, then, we are going to have to look all over the world, the Earth, to find nature for real. No, the search is impossible — the objectors continue — because the problem is not what we are looking at, some world-Earth, it is what we are looking with, a world-view: our reason, our culture and its words.”

3 Negative is used in the sense of “consisting in, or characterized by, the absence rather than the presence of distinguishing features, not in terms of value”. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/science-and-technology/technology/technology-terms-and-concepts/negative>

Nature is essential for placemaking (Bush et al 2020). Another interesting theoretical contradiction emerges when we deal with the anthropological determinations of space and place. Usually, the first term refers to the physical environment, which can only become the second if it carries social meanings that are culturally and historically constructed (Aucoin 2017). In this sense, nature can only become a place when it is embodied, that is, when it becomes a “location where human experience and consciousness take on a material and spatial form” (Low and Lawrence Zúñiga 2003, 1). How, then, can nature, defined by the absence of humans and their interventions, become a place characterized by social meaning and human presence?

This paper argues that the answer to this question can be found in the study of perceptions of natural spaces, official scientific and political discourse, which UNESCO has been constructing and sustaining for more than a couple of decades. UNESCO sees nature as an endangered entity, a gift and responsibility. It takes its constructed characteristics as objectively true and universally valuable. Therefore, nature becomes an artifact and place because of cognitive interference by humans, and an object for conservation.

Berkley argues that our knowledge of nature, what is conventionally thought of as “external reality”, is not actually based on the existence of mind-independent things. Instead, he claims that our understanding of nature is shaped by the expectation of certain perceptions under very specific circumstances (Descola 2004, 86). As an empiricist, he thinks that the perceived only exists in the minds of the ones who do the perceiving.

Following these two points of view, the paper is structured as a conversation between the generally accepted dualistic worldview of UNESCO that distinguishes between an objective nature and a subjective culture, and the idea that nature is also a product of cultural construction, that humans are part of nature, and that everything they do is therefore natural. The goal is to explore the idea that natural processes are inherently good according to moral standards, and to understand how this idea has influenced human behavior in relation to environmental protection, but also in many other aspects of life. The ontological question of what is ‘nature’ has important epistemological implications because various senses of ‘nature’ have been used to establish a foundation for truth and science (Demeritt 2002, 777).

UNESCO and natural landscapes

“Natural World Heritage – Nature’s most precious gifts to humanity”⁴

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is a global international organization, which primarily directs its work towards

4 Quote from UNESCO official webpage. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/natural-world-heritage/>

peacekeeping. The core belief of the organization, which is also part of its constitutive document, is the following: ‘Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defenses of peace must be constructed.’ Designating the defense of peace as a goal, at the time this document was created in 1945, was a means to restore stability and dignity to the victims of war. The war caused generations to be deprived of basic human rights (the right to life and personal security, right to move freely), which at this time are roughly defined also as the rights to culture and integrity of identity, to education, science and art. UNESCO took all this upon itself, in order to restore and develop human rights through democracy and the rule of law (Ćuković 2019).

Part of the peacekeeping, according to UNESCO, is to recognize all of world’s heritage as heritage of all humanity – material, intangible and natural. Heritage lists are being made, and the idea of having elements of heritage in one place should have reinforced unity. But the structure and *modus operandi* of the organization, which rely on (national) states as basic cells of its functioning, has with time changed the perspective both on the ownership of natural heritage as well as on the cultural.

The concept of natural heritage is quite interesting. At first, one can assume that it stems out of the anthropological domain of research, but with further observation, nature in this sense follows the same construction processes as cultural heritage. If we take into account the way that it was defined, we can freely say that natural heritage *is* cultural heritage.

Natural heritage was established and defined in the “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage” from 1972. In the Article 2 of this document, UNESCO provides us with its perspective on natural sites:

For the purposes of this Convention, the following shall be considered as “natural heritage”:

- natural features consisting of physical and biological formations or groups of such formations, which are of outstanding universal value from the aesthetic or scientific point of view;
- geological and physiographical formations and precisely delineated areas which constitute the habitat of threatened species of animals and plants of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation;
- natural sites or precisely delineated natural areas of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science, conservation or natural beauty.⁵

5 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage The General Conference of UNESCO adopted on 16 November 1972, Article 2.

Thus, this definition is not strictly formed through the criterion of people not existing in those areas, but it implies that its characteristics are something that was developed independently of human influence. However, the point is that its characteristics are constructed and valorized by human species. I argue that the works of physical forces that were perceived by people as outstanding and aesthetically pleasing are still artifacts, because culture gave them meaning, through building folklore around them and giving context for interpretation, so that the pyramid and a hill made by tectonic movements can both be regarded as cultural heritage.

UNESCO still sees *cultural* as just an interesting color that can be added to insignificant aspect of life, but not as a possible interpretation of reality. Western scientific discourse is the only universal truth for this organization, therefore it can never be perceived as cultural construction. That is why natural sites must be separated from cultural in their documents.

In this sense, scientific reasons for a certain location to be regarded and treated as a natural site are seen as objective, but what about aesthetic values, where do they originate from? On the official page of the organization, it is explained that “to be inscribed on the World Heritage List, a site must have values such as superlative natural phenomena; represent major states of earth’s history, demonstrate significant ecological and biological processes and contain important natural habitats,” but there is not a mention of what it means to be beautiful. Looking at criteria for inscription of properties and browsing the list of World Heritage Sites contributes to a better understanding of the esthetic criterion, that was left out of the Convention.

As stated on their web page, UNESCO 1972 Convention “provided international recognition to around 3,500,000 km² in over 250 terrestrial and marine sites across more than 100 countries,” placing 227 natural properties on the list. Elements on the list are marked as natural, cultural or mixed. There are six cultural and four natural (the same ones I quoted on a previous page) criteria described and explained in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, which, besides the text of the Convention, is the main working tool of World Heritage. Some examples of only natural sites are the following: Cold Winter Deserts of Turan (Uzbekistan), Okavango Delta (Botswana), Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks, Peninsula Valdés (Patagonia) and Getbol, Korean Tidal Flats. The so-called national parks make for a significant amount of only natural sites. All of these parks are also tourist spots, and are all accompanied by recreational spots, which leads us to the conclusion that the beauty criterion is formed through the tourist gaze⁶, and not some universal value.

A national park is an anthropological subject per se, and its supposed intactness by culture has been compromised by the mere idea of belonging to a

6 John Ury’s concept was first developed in his book (1990) *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*.

group of people. The establishment of the first national park, the Yellowstone, in 1872⁷, was the world's first instance of a large-scale wilderness preservation in public interest (Nash 1970, 726). The importance of national parks resides not solely in their preservation, but also in the enjoyment of the preserved environment being benevolent towards tourist.

But the policies of national parks include the preservation of human communities that can be found there, and in the light of defining nature and wilderness as deprived of human presence, we have to conclude that there are degrees to which this can be perceived. Obviously, small native communities that live in areas marked as national parks are considered to be closer to nature, or a part of it? If they are not removed or excluded (Colchester 2003, Choudhary 2000), indigenous populations are controlled and curtailed (Campbell 2006) and treated as some kind of an exotic fauna, and a part of nature, rather than agents who have also transformed their landscape (O'Neill 2005, 486).

Many programs and projects for environmental conservation created by UNESCO and the UN in general are relying on what is called indigenous knowledge, that is "embedded in a cosmology that reveres the *one-ness* of life, considers nature as sacred and acknowledges humanity as a part of it."⁸ A conclusion can be drawn that native people are "often among the most effective stewards of nature,"⁹ it being based on the premise that "at least a quarter of the world's land area is owned, managed, used or occupied by Indigenous Peoples, and nature in these areas is degrading less quickly than in others."¹⁰ But at least one other conclusion can be safely drawn – native people do not partake in large industries that will affect environment on a big scale.

This, almost nativistic point of view, stressing that only those who live in a certain area know what is good for it, that is implied in UNESCO documents, can also be regarded as xenophobic and anti-immigrant. But if we define nativism as "a philosophical position, sometimes translated into a movement, whose primary goal is to restrict immigration in order to maintain some deemed essential characteristics of a given political unit" (Guia 2016), we can understand why it has become an important part of conservation activism.

7 It is generally thought that the concept of a park or nature reserve under state ownership originated in the United States in 1870 and that the world's first such park was Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, created through legislation signed by the U.S. Pres. Ulysses S. Grant in 1872. However, some naturalists and others have argued that there is evidence that indicates that the creation of Yellowstone was predated by the creation of Bogd Khan Mountain National Park in Mongolia, which may date from as early as 1778. <https://www.britannica.com/science/national-park>

8 Drissi, Siham. 2023. **Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect.** <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/indigenous-peoples-and-nature-they-protect>

9 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/11/climate/nature-conservation-30-percent.html>

10 Drissi, Siham. 2023. **Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect.** <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/indigenous-peoples-and-nature-they-protect>

Political implications of construction of nature as a place

“Nature is only the name given to a certain contemporary state of science.”(Larrere 1996: 122)

“A state of nature could be a reactionary idea, against change, or a reforming idea, against what was seen as decadence.”(Williams 1980, 78)

Conservationists in bioscience and ecology have long had a very “fixed” vision of nature, seen as a heritage to be preserved from human disturbance and a set of fragile equilibriums that need to stay balanced for life to exist (Simberloff, 2014 as cited in Ducarme Couvet 2014). It is considered that this balance has been facing dramatic changes in the past century and more, and most of these changes are anthropogenic. In this discourse ‘nature’ is defined as a place without people, and this would suggest that nature is best protected by keeping humans far removed, so that it can continue to run itself. (*Nature* 455, 263–264 2008)¹¹.

A big experiment on this thought was the lockdown during the COVID 19 pandemic, when the overall human activities seemed to decrease. The narrative about how nature begun its restorative process has emerged. Restoration was perceived through the presence of wild animals in cities (Vardi 2021), dolphins in unusual waters and through some quantitative data about air pollution. Protected areas have seen a significant decrease in visitors, largely due to the travel ban and park closure, which has reduced stress on wildlife (Ankit et al. 2020). Symbolically, this was perceived as a natural alignment, a restoration of values and an order superior to people, i.e. their cultural norms and worldviews, which brought man to the brink of chaos and self-destruction and an irreversible disruption of the general prerequisites of existence (Pišev, Žikić i Stajić 2020, 871). But research shows that, at the same time, some of the world resources (e.g. forests) were used much more than before lockdown (Brancalion 2020).

UNESCO as an organization, even though it sees a problem in human activities does not suggest antihuman or antinatalist politics, but tries to find a middle ground. Couvet and Ducarme (2014) remind us an term that Michael Rosenzweig coined as « reconciliation ecology » (Rosenzweig, 2003), postulating that nature can, in some contexts, co-exist with some degree of human presence and activity, and that sometimes such presence can even be favorable to biodiversity. In something that Rosenzweig (2003) called the win-win ecology, the conservation of biodiversity is connected to a sustainable use of nature, which is, as Couvet & Ducarme (2014, 6) put it, “different from the traditional American conception of conservation often limited to

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the preservation of some remote sanctuaries of pristine wilderness”. This way protection and conservation are spreading to landscapes that were influenced by people, but in a sustainable manner, which is the first step in re-defining nature and in creating a better understanding of environmental problems. If we stop looking at the ecological situation as being a natural vs. artificial problem, and regard people’s agency as a natural force, we will see more clearly which processes are good for sustainability and which are not, since both of these values are present in the arena of human activities and in the so-called natural processes.

A recurring environmental theme over the past 50 years has referred to the importance of individual “nature encounters” and “nature experiences” as pathways to pro-environmental behavior (Beery & Wolf-Watz 2014, 198). But these are also creating a discrepancy between nature and urban or agricultural spaces, and re-enforcing the construction of nature as a separate place.

UNESCO symbolizes the authority for an objective interpretation of the state of nature. Western natural science seems a primary place where humans know nature for real, but from the anthropological perspective, humans know nature through socially-constructed science (Rolson 1997). While indigenous knowledge is considered to be essential to the prevention of climate change, it is only when it is aligned with western knowledge that it gets the respect.

Because of its complexity, nature in the preservation rhetoric is replaced by the term environment. Thus, even if we are not able to understand nature in all its objective aspects, we can surely know things about our immediate environment and try to maintain it so that it can be kind to us. But the way that nature is detached from humans, environment is also objectified and seen as a distinct part of reality, and it is one of the last survivors of the mind—body dualism (Rolson 1997).

After it was turned into a separate “thing,” an inexhaustible source of resources to be extracted, traded, and violated as a living being (Naknanuk 2022), nature became a subject of justice based on its rights-bearing entities, such as interests, agency and the capacity for suffering (Smith 2006). The depiction of nature as a person-like entity is at the core of conservative ecological politics (Čuković 2023). Furthermore, UNESCO politicizes nature by giving it boundaries and making it a property of a specific nation or a state, so there is a tendency to add a national component to the identity of this personified entity.

There is a clear message behind the global UNESCO idea of nature – it exist for us, humans. It is a gift to humanity, and we have to preserve it so that we can continue to live and breathe. To preserve nature, really means to preserve those parts of it that are of importance to us and for those species that are an important part of the harmonic natural world, and are kind to us. So I argue that climate environmental activism is an ultimate cultivation of nature and the biggest intervention imagined by humans. The whole of the planet Earth in a sense becomes an artifact.

The anthropocene and global notion of the need to preserve nature has become a paradigm of our time. Numerous different aspects of society are affected by the analogy natural and artificial, as first being inherently good and right, and the other bad and wrong. The political implication of ecological activism coincides with technological innovations and reinforces the establishing of the distinction natural/artificial as being good/bad. This distinction is widely applied in other aspects of life, while surrounding politics are used by conservatives all around the world as a discrediting instrument. An old type of argument, called *appeal to nature*¹² has re-emerged as a collateral outcome of the environmental activism wave.

With respect to the spectrum of naturalness, we are the ones who are making our own decisions regarding, on the one side – the natural, and on the other side – the artificial. When we think of medical treatment, athletic performance, food, elections, war conflicts, and travels – it shows us that we are increasingly more inclined to consider the argument of naturalness. Natural in that sense is something that is tied to its primary form, uninfluenced and therefore the way it's meant to be.

Concluding remarks

Science notes that the conditions under which most life is possible are threatened by human activity. The term anthropocene was introduced to denote a geological age in which these activities are detrimental to the environment. This is the perspective adopted by UNESCO, and it has been a discourse that has produced most of the global solutions and initiatives to reverse such degradation.

In this explanation of causality, nature is perceived as a collateral victim, a tortured object, or even a subject deprived of its right and agency. It seems as if the political actions concerning the scientific clarification had to personify nature in order for the construction of compassion to take place. It is an old argument, but it is interesting that when it was revived in the nineteenth century in the arguments about evolution, even those who were willing to dispense with the idea of God usually retained and even emphasized the other very comparable principle of personified nature (Williams 1980, 70).

Environmentalists fight to preserve the environment, to maintain homeostasis, because it is the prerequisite for the life of humans and certain other species. The need to ensure sustainability stems from the fact that humans and some other species (or all life forms) that we value are going extinct. To inspire people to engage in sustainability and conservation, nature

12 In *Principia Ethica*, Moore(1922) defined this as an argument or rhetorical tactic in which it is proposed that “a thing is good *because* it is ‘natural’, or bad *because* it is ‘unnatural’.

must be presented as something valuable, both as a place and a process that is benevolent and not indifferent to humans.

The conservation of nature begins in the discourse of UNESCO with the protection of undoubtedly natural areas, away from large human settlements, by protecting their supposed integrity. Nature, in UNESCO's conception, is once more perceived as a place or entity that exists independently of man, and as a process that has not been influenced by humans.

But as soon as this process was interrupted by humans, a catastrophe began. Nature as a process is seen as the right way to move forward, and the main goal behind the conservation policy is to take a step back and yield to its guidance. I perceive nature as the global religion of the 21st century, analogous to a godly, divine figure. And as a religion, it can be applied to all aspects of social life.

There is a drawback to labeling scientific knowledge about climate change as a social construction because it encourages political quietism in the face of pressing environmental problems (Demeritt 2002 767). However, it is of great importance to understand the numerous implications and popular interpretations regarding this issue. In fact, the public policy is probably inspired more by cultural conceptions of nature than by scientific arguments, conservation in US probably had that much success in the early twentieth century due to cultural and religious reasons (Nash, 1967 after Ducarme and Couvet 2020). This paper's focus resides in the specific case of understanding nature in its relation to space, while numerous further studies in the areas of food, health, and world politics are to be conducted.

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Jelena Ćuković

Priroda kao mesto: konstruisanje prirodnih područja u Uneskovoj listi svetske baštine

Apstrakt: Ideja o fizičkom prostoru lišenom čovekovog uticaja, kao nečemu vrednom divljenja, leži u osnovi koncepta prirodnih područja. U ovom radu se bavim tezom da su Uneksovi prirodni pejzaži jednako društveno konstruisani (artefakti) kao i materijalno i nematerijalno kulturno nasleđe, kao i da proces zaštite remeti osnovnu premisu netaknutosti. Primeniću nekoliko analitičkih alata razvijenih tokom istorije discipline, koji se tiču antropologije mesta i prostora i antropologije životne sredine, na definicije i propise koje je Unesco kreirao u vezi sa prirodom i prirodnim lokalitetima. Cilj ovog istraživanja je da doprinese boljem razumevanju upotrebe pojma prirode u izgradnji univerzalnog sistema vrednosti i globalnih političkih implikacija takvih vrednosti.

Ključne reči: priroda, prirodna područja, Unesco, kultura, životna sredina, antropologija prostora;

Primljeno: 25. 09. 2023.

Odobreno: 21. 10. 2023.