The human-nature divide in European Union environmental policy

Louise Lamers[1]

Ghent University, Belgium

Abstract

According to political ecologists, today's major challenge in environmental policy revolves around rethinking the ontology of the human-nature divide, which assumes "humans" to be fundamentally different from and superior to "nature", contributing to environmental and social injustices. The European Union (EU), a global normative leader in environmental policies, wields substantial influence over both domestic and international environmental agendas. However, uncertainty surrounds the EU's stance on the human-nature relationship. This article addresses the question of how the human-nature relationship is present in EU environmental policy and how it evolved over time. It offers a two-fold contribution to existing literature. First, it constructs an analytical framework to gauge the alignment of EU policy with either a human-nature divide ontology or a human-nature relational ontology. Second, it makes an empirical contribution by employing the analytical framework through an analysis of all eight EU Environmental Action Programs and the Green Deal, encompassing the period 1973-2022. The article (1) nuances unidimensional evaluations of the human-nature divide as being present or absent, by demonstrating the need to unpack it into three dimensions: why nature is protected; how people position themselves vis-à-vis nature; and how nature is perceived (2) finds that while the divide may diminish in one dimension, it can persist or reappear in others; it is hence omnipresent, but manifests in different ways (3) offers insights into how various dimensions interact to shape different policy discourses, identified as four human-nature relationship profiles.

Key words: Human-nature divide, EU environmental policy, political ecology, political ontology

Resume

Selon les écologistes politiques, le principal défi actuel en politique environnementale consiste à repenser l'ontologie de la division homme-nature, qui suppose que les "humains" sont fondamentalement différents et supérieurs à la "nature", contribuant aux injustices environnementales et sociales. L'Union Européenne (UE), leader normatif mondial en politiques environnementales, exerce une influence considérable sur les programmes environnementaux nationaux et internationaux. Cependant, la position de l'UE sur la relation homme-nature reste incertaine. Cet article aborde la question de la présence de la relation homme-nature dans la politique environnementale de l'UE et de son évolution dans le temps. L'article apporte une double contribution à la littérature. Premièrement, il construit un cadre analytique permettant d'évaluer l'alignement de la politique de l'UE sur l'ontologie de la division homme-nature ou sur une ontologie relationnelle. Deuxièmement, il apporte une contribution empirique en utilisant le cadre analytique par une analyse critique du discours des huit programmes d'action pour l'environnement et du Green Deal, couvrant la période 1973-2022. L'article (1) nuance les évaluations unidimensionnelles de la division homme-nature comme étant présent ou absent, en démontrant la nécessité de la décomposer en troises différentes dimensions: pourquoi la nature est protégée; comment les gens se positionnent par rapport à la nature; comment la nature est perçue (2) constate que si la division peut diminuer dans une dimension, il peut persister ou réapparaître dans d'autres; elle est donc omniprésente, mais se manifeste de différentes manières (3) offre un aperçu de la manière dont les différentes

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[1] Louise Lamers, Ghent Institute for International and European Studies, Ghent University, Belgium. Email: louise.lamers@ugent.be. I would like to thank my colleagues at Ghent University and the UACES conference for their comments on earlier drafts of this article, and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and feedback.

dimensions interagissent pour façonner différents discours politiques, identifiés comme quatre profils de relations homme-nature.
Mots-clés: Division homme-nature, politique environnementale de la UE, ecologie politique, ontologie politique

Resumen

Según los ecologistas políticos, el principal desafío en la política ambiental actual radica en reconsiderar la división ontológica humano-naturaleza, que supone que los "humanos" son diferentes y superiores a la "naturaleza", contribuyendo a injusticias medioambientales y sociales. La Unión Europea (UE), líder global en políticas ambientales, ejerce una influencia significativa en las agendas ambientales nacionales e internacionales. Sin embargo, existe incertidumbre sobre la postura de la UE ante la relación humano-naturaleza. Por tanto, este artículo aborda cómo se refleja la relación humano-naturaleza en la política ambiental de la UE y su evolución a lo largo del tiempo. Este artículo contribuye a la literature de dos maneras. En primer lugar, crea un marco analítico para evaluar si la política de la UE se alinea con una división ontológica entre humanos y naturaleza o una ontología relacional. En segundo lugar, para aplicar este marco, realiza un análisis de los ocho Programas de Acción Ambiental de la UE y el Green Deal, abarcando desde 1973 hasta 2022. El artículo (1) matiza evaluaciones unidimensionales de la división humano-naturaleza al mostrar la necesidad de desglosarlaen tres diferentes dimensiones: porqué se protege la naturaleza; cómo se posiciona la gente ante la naturaleza; cómo se percibe la naturaleza, (2) encuentra que, aunque la división puede disminuir en una dimensión, puede persistir o reaparecer en otras; por lo tanto, es omnipresente, pero se manifiesta de diferentes maneras (3) ofrece perspectivas sobre cómo estas dimensiones interactúan para dar forma a cuatro perfiles de relación entre humanos y naturaleza en la política.
Palabras clave: División hombre-naturaleza, político medioambiental de la UE, ecología política, ontología política

1. Introduction

Political ecologists (PE) have demonstrated how EU environmental policies have generated socio-environmental injustices (Molnár, *et al*., 2023; Deberdt, 2024). They have shown how these injustices stem from an ingrained ontology of a human-nature-divide, viewing humans as superior and separate from nature, treating the latter as a mere resource for the former (Biermann, 2021; Bluwstein, 2021; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; Moore, 2015).

For instance, the human-nature divide has inspired fortress conservation policies, which isolate and protect 'nature' from human interventions (Hutton, *et al*., 2015; Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). The approach perpetuates the physical alienation of humans from nature by forcibly displacing communities residing within areas that overlap with natural parks (Marijnen, 2017; Garrido, *et al*., 2021). The EU has been implicated in such practices, for example supporting them in the Virunga National Park in the DR Congo where 'real' nature considered as 'wilderness' is protected away from local subsistence farming practices to preserve it for privileged human groups such as trophy hunters or tourists (Marijnen, 2017; Ojeda, 2012).

A second injustice resulting from the human-nature divide ontology is the exploitation of nature without moral qualms, as nature is perceived to be in service to humankind (Moore, 2015). This division portrays nature as inferior and subservient to certain human groups, encouraging its commodification and monetarization as resources or services. This is exemplified by the reduction of Amazon areas in some global policymaking to mere tradeable carbon sinks. The EU has been a pioneer in establishing a carbon credit trading system which, during its previous stages, resulted in the outsourcing of emission reduction activities, shifting the burden of mitigating climate change onto vulnerable communities while allowing emitters to pay for the right to pollute (Jeong, 2018; Gutiérrez-Escobar, *et al*., 2022; La Hoz Theuer, *et al.*, 2023; Mukono, 2024).

Third, the depoliticization of the human-nature divide ontology engrained in these EU policies disregards that other communities hold different human-nature ontologies where natural territory and community identity are inextricably linked (Temper, 2018; Méndez Polo, 2019; Parra-Romero & Castillo, 2023; Rivera-Nuñez, 2024). Separating the two leads not only to material injustices, but also to ontological injustices. A certain reality is imposed on these communities that uproots their lifeworld.

Building on politico-ecological scholarship that highlights the link between these socio-environmental injustices and a human-nature divide ontology, this article aims to contribute to political ecology by developing a framework to assess whether EU policy aligns more with a human-nature divide or a relational ontology. This framework draws on the three main typologies used in political ecology literature, which represent the central debates about human-nature relations. These typologies, as key dimensions of the human-nature relationship, are positioned along a spectrum that ranges from a dividing ontology to a relational ontology. This framework is developed through a combination of deductive and inductive approaches, drawing from a literature review, and insights gained from the empirical analysis.

The article further contributes to PE scholarship by applying this framework to an empirical analysis of all eight EU Environmental Action Programs (EAPs) and the Green Deal (GD) to address the question of how the human-nature relationship is present in EU environmental policy, and how it evolved over time (Fairclough, 2023). These documents, spanning from 1973 to 2022 and totaling 341 pages, represent the EU's overarching environmental policy strategy. To the best of my knowledge, no comprehensive analysis of these documents regarding human-nature ontologies has been undertaken thus far.

I demonstrate that a simple linear progression from a human-nature divide ontology to a relational one cannot be traced. The data indicate that while the divide may diminish in one dimension, it can persist or reappear in others, highlighting the need to unpack the human-nature relationship into different dimensions. Moreover, specific combinations of the three dimensions result in particular discourses, identified as human-nature profiles, that guide environmental policy.

The article is organized as follows: first, based on an exploration of academic literature related to human-nature relationships in public policy, I construct an analytical framework. Second, I briefly outline how I deploy this analytical framework through a coding analysis of EU flagship documents. In the third section, I will present and interpret the results of the discourse analysis. Subsequently, I will discuss how particular combinations of the three dimensions of the analytical framework reflect particular discourses, identified as human-nature profiles, that guide environmental policy.

2. Creating an analytical framework

Human-nature ontologies refer to how individuals or societies conceptualize 'humans' and 'nature' and their relationships (Blaser, 2009). On one end of the spectrum, there is a hierarchical divide, where humans are seen as superior and separate from nature, allowing for an exploitative relationship (Moore, 2015; Otero, *et al*., 2020; Rivera-Nuñez, 2024: p.145) and anthropocentric environmental policies (Van den Born, 2008; Nash, 1989; Pattberg, 2007; Welchman, 2012; Falkner & Buzan, 2019; Williams, 2021). On the other is a relational ontology suggesting that humans are an integral part of nature, with a more harmonious and cooperative approach to environmental governance (Acosta, 2018; Tassanari, *et al*., 2020; Rivera-Nuñez, 2024: p. 145). Holding a relational ontology significantly impacts the effectiveness of ambitious environmental policies (e.g., Bryan Norton's Convergence Hypothesis 1991; Stenmark, 2002; Kopnina, 2016; Sarkar & Minteer, 2018; Ghasemi, 2020; Rydenfelt, 2022).

Numerous scholars have critiqued the ideas and actions represented by the human-nature divide ontology. Val Plumwood argued it is problematic, not because of difference between humans and nature *per se*, but rather because it constitutes a particular kind of dichotomy: a dualism (1993). Plumwood explains how dualisms are based on radical exclusion, the maximization of non-shared characteristics, and the identification of one side of the dualism through the othering of the other (1993). Hence, overcoming the human-nature divide is "to replace it with a non-hierarchical concept of difference" (1993, p. 59).

Roderick Nash provides a comprehensive historical overview of human-nature relations in the US and Europe until the 1980s (Nash, 1987), and there have been works by political ecologists, political ontologists, and ecofeminists like Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Jason Moore, Marisol de la Cadena, Arturo Escobar, Mario Blaser, and Val Plumwood, among others. A central theme across them is the profound connection between human-nature and interhuman hierarchies (Bookchin, 1982; Nash, 1987; Moore, 2015). This link has been articulated by different schools of thought such as ecofeminism, which acknowledges the connection

between the violence female bodies face from patriarchy with the violence Earth faces through extractivism (Plumwood, 1993; Merchant, 1980).

Jason Moore's concept of the 'Capitalocene' challenges the widely recognized 'Anthropocene', arguing that it is capitalism, rather than *all* human activities, that harms nature (2015). Capitalism's reliance on unlimited resource exploitation benefits from the analytical separation of 'Humans' and 'Nature', treating the latter as a resource (2015). He argues that Nature also includes specific human groups exploited for the benefit of ruling establishments (2015). Alberto Acosta confirms that the domination of humans is inseparable from the exploitation of nature, citing how imperialism and colonization led to the ruthless exploitation of people and natural resources, resulting in the genocide of Indigenous communities (2018).

While the Anthropocene challenges the traditional human-nature divide by recognizing humans as part of the ecosystem (Lövbrand, *et al*., 2009; Lawrence, 2016), terms like the Capitalocene demonstrate that the human-nature divide ontology persists in various ways throughout Western Europe. Humans are indeed recognized to be part of the ecosystem, but non-privileged human groups and the non-human are instrumentalized for the capitalist establishment. This raises questions about the exact nature of the human-nature divide. What dimensions persist, and which have been overcome?

The political ecology literature has introduced numerous typologies to elucidate the human-nature relationship. While typologies can be useful tools for understanding complex realities, they inherently risk oversimplification and the reinforcement of problematic ontologies. For instance, dichotomies like anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism may inadvertently perpetuate the human-nature divide. Nevertheless, typologies can be valuable if approached with openness (Huutoniemi & Williamo, 2014). The article makes use of van den Born *et al.*'s framework of Visions of Nature to capture three densely typologized dimensions of human-nature relations: (1) why is nature protected? (2) how do people position themselves in relation to nature? (3) what is perceived as nature? (2001). Her framework is particularly well-suited, as it effectively reflects the three key debates that emerged from my literature review.

The article scales the positions within each of the three dimensions of the human-nature relationship along a spectrum, representing either a more relational or a more dividing human-nature ontology, allowing for comparability. This resulted in the analytical framework as depicted in Figure 1.

Why is nature protected?

This first dimension of the human-nature relationship is captured in academic debates exploring the motivations behind environmental protection, and distinguishes between instrumental and intrinsic valuation. Instrumental valuation prioritizes nature conservation for anthropocentric reasons, i.e. for the sake of human well-being, considering factors like aesthetics, recreation, scientific value, safeguarding long-term societal prosperity for future generations (also known as the survival narrative of enlightened anthropocentrism), economic gains, and human health (Rolston, 1981; Stenmark, 2002). Intrinsic valuation refers to the appreciation of nature independent from its utility to humans (Piccolo, 2017).

This typology is still rooted within the human-nature divide because its logic tends to present both valuations as a dualism: nature is protected either for humans or for other-than-humans. To address this limitation, Piccolo's relational valuation is useful, advocating a holistic approach to protect the planet as a vast ecosystem for the well-being of all nature, including both humans and other-than-humans without making the distinction explicit (Lovelock & Margulis, 1974).

How these stances are situated on the dividing-relational ontology spectrum appears straightforward. Instrumental valuation leans towards a divide as it prioritizes anthropocentric well-being. In contrast, intrinsic valuation implies a departure from human exceptionalism. Nevertheless, intrinsic value excludes human-nature interactions, thereby reinforcing a dividing ontology. Relational valuation, in contrast, explicitly favors environmental protection for all life. As Piccolo states, relational valuation encompasses both "anthropocentric value for humans – life cannot, by definition, exist without the values provided by ecosystems, but…also…ecocentric value – those values which exist without reference to humans" (2017, p. 9) In summary, the objectives of nature protection can be ordered along the spectrum from hierarchical divide to relational ontology as follows: Instrumental, intrinsic, relational.

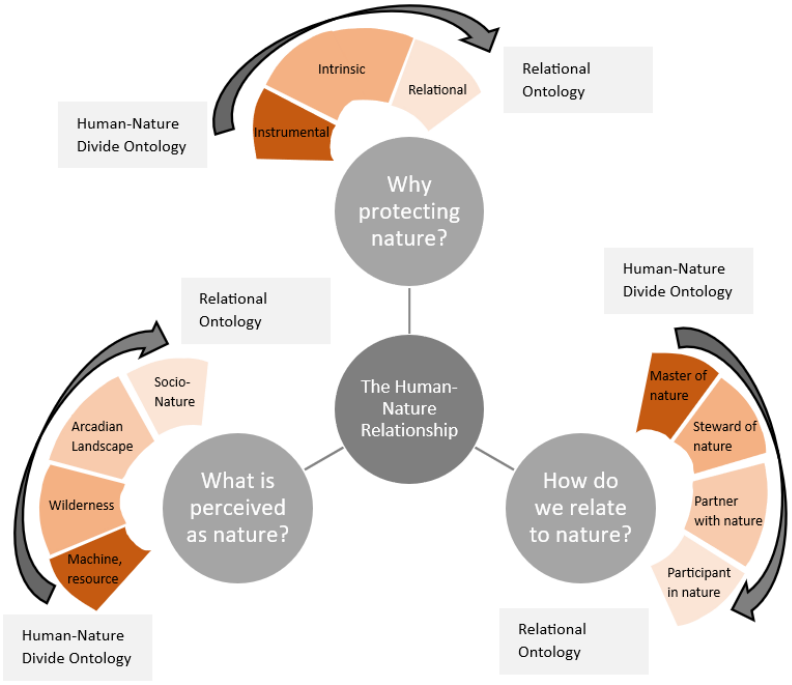

Figure 1: (own creation). Analytical framework for tracing human-nature ontologies as dividing or relational.

Note: The color gradient represents the spectrum of human-nature ontologies: the darker the shade of orange, the more the position leans toward a human-nature divide ontology; the lighter the shade, the more it tends toward a relational ontology.

The literature presents conflicting views on whether instrumental or intrinsic motives dominate international and European environmental policy. Some scholars assert that nature conservation traditionally relied on intrinsic bio-/ecocentrism and that instrumental anthropocentric motives took precedence only recently, while others argue that intrinsic value concepts gained prominence in recent policy documents like the Convention on Biological Diversity (Uggla, 1992; Rientjes, 2002; Rosa & Da Silva, 2005; Smith, 2014; Biermann, 2021). The EU's Natura2000 initiative is viewed as an expression of ecocentric motives, though others contend that it merely masks an intensified instrumental stance (Rosa & Da Silva, 2005; Biermann, 2021).

How do people position themselves in relation to nature?

The second dimension evolves around how people position themselves in relation to non-human nature. Van den Born and De Groot developed the widely used Humans and Nature Scale to trace this (e.g. De Groot & Van den Born, 2007; De Groot, *et al*., 2011; Ngoc & Van Den Born, 2019; Wijsen, *et al*., 2023). It identifies four types of positions vis-à-vis nature: the master over, steward of, partner with, and participant in nature. These terms are defined by van den Born as follows:

> The Master over nature stands above nature. In his interactions with nature, he is not restricted by moral constraints or knowledge about nature's fragility. Economic growth and technology are expected to provide answers to his problems...
>
> The Steward of nature also stands above nature but manages nature. Nature is not owned by the Steward but entrusted to him. The stewards owes responsibility to God or future generations...
>
> The Partner with nature stands side by side with nature. Humans and nature are considered to be of equal value. Humans should work together with nature with the aim that this interaction will benefit both…
>
> The Participant in nature is part of nature, not just biologically, but also on the spiritual level. Although humans are a (small) part of nature, they are active participants. For the Participant, the bond between self and nature is very important; it co-constitutes the self. (2008, p. 88)

These positions are clearly organized on the spectrum from a hierarchical divide to a relational ontology in the following order: Master (humans are different from and superior to nature) – Steward (humans are not only different from and superior to nature, but also responsible for it) – Partner (humans are equal to but different from nature) – Participant (humans are an integral part of nature and hold equal value).

There is a widely accepted consensus that in the European Union the notion of mastering nature has been abandoned in favor of a stewardship approach (De Groot, 2010, p. 128; Falkner & Buzan, 2019). However, this shift has sparked intense debate about whether stewardship should be enhanced, considering it a positive force that can reverse the environmental crisis (e.g. Welchman, 2012; Williams, 2021), or should be replaced by more radical egalitarian relations with non-human nature such as Partner and Participant positions (e.g. Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). Moreover it is often assumed, without much consideration, that the Partner and Participant positions are not represented in international environmental policy (e.g. Welchman, 2012; Williams, 2021).

What is perceived as nature?

The third dimension centers on the perception of nature, with the literature distinguishing between wilderness and socio-nature (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020; Sullivan, 2011; Hutton, *et al*., 2015). The idea of wilderness portrays nature as vast, pristine, and untouched by humans, with iconic plant and animal species (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020, p. 10). In contrast, socio-nature refers to our immediate natural surroundings, shaped by human and non-human interactions, such as agricultural areas and urban green spaces (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020, p. 14; Castree & Braun, 2001).

The distinction between wilderness and socio-nature has sparked a debate over people-versus-parks (Sullivan, 2011; Büscher, *et al*., 2012; Hutton, *et al*., 2015; Kopnina, *et al*., 2018). Perceiving nature as wilderness has led to policies isolating nature from human presence in parks and reserves, at times resulting in communities being forcibly removed from their lands to make way for what is perceived as pristine nature (Marijnen, 2017; Garrido, *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, certain communities, especially indigenous ones, were categorized as 'natural' and harmonious with wilderness, while others, like farmers, were seen as adversaries and excluded from so-called untouched areas (Ojeda, 2012; Acosta, 2018, p.116; Girard, *et al*., 2022, p. 23; Rivera-Nuñez, 2024).

On the other hand, perceiving nature as socio-nature has shifted the policy focus towards creating hybrid spaces where humans and nature coexist; eco-agriculture, eco-tourism, and green cities (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020). Partner approaches have not been without controversy, as they often align with neoliberal philosophies that aim to integrate communities into global markets, with limited success stories for communities and the nature they intend to protect (Fletcher, 2010; Sullivan, 2011; Büscher, *et al*., 2012). This has triggered renewed calls for stricter conservation approaches (Fletcher, 2018, p. 412).

The study's empirical data highlighted two other notable positions. First, a distinction between socio-natural and Arcadian landscapes emerged (Van Den Born, *et al*., 2001; Bluwstein, 2021; De Bont, 2022). While both refer to human-made landscapes, Arcadian landscapes hold nationalist and aesthetic value, not referring to bees, roadside flowers, urban gardens or green roofs, but rather to iconic man-made landscapes such as sheep

grazing in the Cotswolds in the UK. Secondly, the data highlighted the prevalent perception of nature as a mere resource, devoid of magic and charm, commonly referred to as 'Machine-Resource' in the literature (Plumwood, 1993, pp.109, 115-116, 119; Merchant, 1980; Uggla, 2010; Acosta, 2018).

Scaling these positions on the human-nature ontology spectrum, the article contends that the Machine-Resource perspective most distinctly reflects a human-nature divide, whereby non-human nature is lifeless. Support for wilderness does not reduce nature to lifeless matter, but understands it as untouched by, and devoid of, humans. Arcadian nature and socio-nature imply a more relational understanding of nature, as both indicate nature to be the result of interactions between humans and non-humans. However, in Arcadian landscapes the human feature is exalted in favor of identity-building, resulting in cases in which the preservation of historical city centers as landscapes without natural features is defended. In sum, the identified perceptions of nature can be organized on the spectrum from a hierarchical divide to a relational ontology in the following order: Machine-Resource, Wilderness, Arcadian Landscape, Socio-Nature.

3. Methodology

To consider the interconnectedness of the key dimensions of human-nature relations above in EU environmental policy over time, I analyzed all eight EU Environmental Action Programs (EAPs) from 1973-2022, and the Green Deal (GD) (2019) based on the analytical framework constructed in the previous section. These flagship documents, totaling 341 pages, outline the EU's comprehensive internal and external environmental policy strategy, aligning with UN Agenda 2030 and the SDGs (United Nations, 2015; United Nations, 2023a). I created three coding schemes based on the analytical framework that reflect the three key dimensions of the human-nature relationship. To make the different stances within the three debates identifiable as codes in the discourse, their definitions were made more specific (Table 1).

The coding process was facilitated using Nvivo software. The codes were aggregated for each document to enable comparability of code presence across them. Because the Green Deal outlines lines of action to implement EU environmental strategy up till 2024, and the 8th EAP builds further on the GD, outlining actions from 2025 up till 2030, tags from the GD and the 8th EAP were aggregated (EAP2022, p. 7). The tag shares for both documents separately can be found in the Annex (Tables 2 & 3). Additionally, qualitative interpretation was made of shifts in human-nature relations within the broader political context of the EU.

4. Environmental Action Programs 1973-2022

Based on these coding schemes, developed to reflect the three main dimensions around which academic debates on human-nature relations have crystallized, this section presents how each dimension has changed over time.

Why is nature protected?

The evolution of motives for environmental protection since the 1970s has involved instrumental and intrinsic motives, which were formerly considered contradictory, but have gradually been merged into the comprehensive instrumental narrative of sustainable development (Jordan, 2008, p. 20, Figure 2).

Coding Scheme 1: Why Protecting Nature?		
Human-Nature **Divide Ontology** ⟷ Human-Nature **Relational Ontology**		
Instrumental	Intrinsic	Relational
Nature is protected to safeguard the services it provides to humanity and to safeguard human lives and the persistence of the human race.	*Nature is protected because of the intrinsic value of non-human nature, plants, animals, and ecosystems, without reference to their utility for humans.*	*nature is protected for human and more-than-human nature in their co-existence, without making the distinction explicit.*

Coding Scheme 2: How Do We Relate To Nature?			
Human-Nature **Divide Ontology** ⟷ Human-Nature **Relational Ontology**			
Master of Nature	Steward of Nature	Partner with Nature	Participant in Nature
The Master of nature sees no point in protecting nature if it is harmful/difficult/has negative consequences for humans or the economy. It can manage nature without moral constraints	*The Steward of nature believes that protecting nature should be a fundamental side-effect of human and economic progress: do-no-harm principle*	*The Partner with nature believes we should give back to nature more then we take: we should actively enhance nature through interacting with it.*	*For the Participant of nature the bond between the self and nature is very important, it co-constitutes the self. Without nature, humans cease to exist, not because they depend on natural resources, but because nature is part of the self.*

Coding Scheme 3: What Do We Perceive As Nature?			
Human-Nature **Divide Ontology** ⟷ Human-Nature **Relational Ontology**			
Machine-Resource	Wilderness	Arcadian Landscape	Socio-Nature
Lifeless nature, dead matter, resources at the service of humans	*Vast, pristine, virgin nature, fixed in time, untouched by humans.*	*Nostalgic landscapes of semi-nature, valued for its aesthetics and sense of nationalism, and in which human interventions are exalted.*	*The natural environment in our direct surroundings. A place in which humans and more-than humans co-habit, without particular nostalgic or majestic features.*

Table 1: (own creation). Three coding schemes for analyzing human-nature relations positioned on the dividing-relational ontology spectrum. Note: The orange color gradient represents the human-nature ontology spectrum: the darker the shade of orange, the more the position leans toward a human-nature divide ontology; the lighter the shade, the more it tends toward a relational ontology.

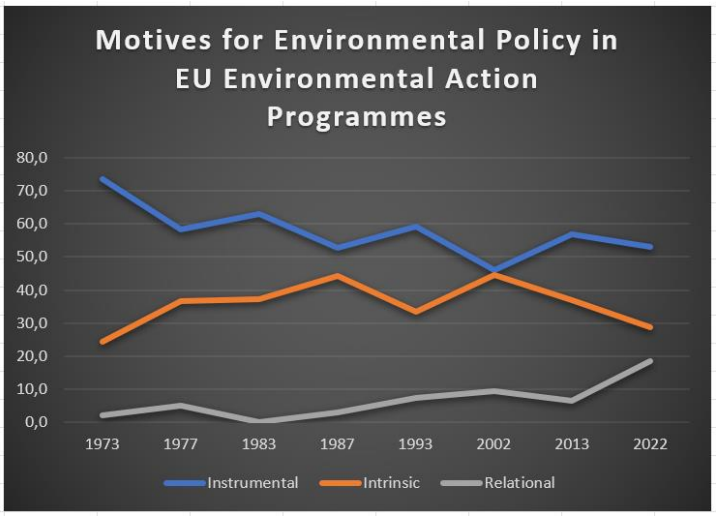

Figure 2: Motives for environmental policy in EU environmental action programs.

In the 1970s, the emergence of the first green parties in Europe and the first UN Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 propelled the environmental agenda (Knill & Liefferink, 2021, pp. 14-15). As a result, the first European Action Program was formulated in 1973, with predominantly instrumental, yet contradicting motives. Firstly, it sought to ensure people's right to a healthy environment (EAP1973, p. 12), as declared during the Stockholm conference (Knill & Liefferink, 2021), with special attention to environmental pollution, working and living conditions, and safe consumer products. Secondly, the Action Program tried to preserve traditional landscapes and historical city centers, reflecting the instrumental motive of aesthetics (EAP1973, p. 42). Third, iconic species – mostly birds – and ecosystems were protected not only for their aesthetic and recreational importance, but also for their intrinsic value (EAP1973, p. 40). Addressing these issues was deemed economically burdensome (EAP1973, p. 7). Consequently, a fourth, instrumental motive for EU environmental policy was to prevent ambitious national measures from endangering the completion of the European common market (EAP1973, p. 7; Knill & Liefferink, 2021, p. 14).

Environmental policy motives shifted in subsequent EAPs. Attention became directed towards resource scarcity, particularly with regards to drinking water and oil, reflecting global preoccupations during the daunting 1979 oil crisis (EAP1977, pp. 14, 16, 29). Environmental policy was strongly linked to improving energy efficiency. Issues like noise pollution were addressed not just from a human health perspective but also as part of energy-saving initiatives (EAP1977, p. 17).

During this period, EU environmental policy aligned with the global trend of connecting environmental concerns with economic development and resource management. The United Nations' Development Decades from the 1960s-1980s, aimed at promoting economic development in the global South, identified resource scarcity and food security as root causes of poverty and urged a sustainable energy transition (United Nations, 2023B). Environmental protection was no longer seen solely as a burden but rather as a prerequisite for economic prosperity. This shift is reflected in the 1983 EAP:

> Originally the central concern was that, as a result of very divergent national policies, disparities would arise capable of affecting the proper functioning of the common market. That could happen with different product standards that lead to barriers to free circulation of goods or with policies that imposed too different charges on firms and so created distortions of competition. Now, however, the common environmental policy is motivated equally by the observation that the resources of the environment are the basis of — but also constitute the limits to — further economic and social development and the improvement of living conditions. It aims therefore not only to protect human health, nature and the environment but also to ensure that natural resources are well managed. (p. 3)

Gradually, this trend led to the crystallization of the narrative of 'sustainable development' which added a survival overtone to this idea (Nash, 1989, p. 150). Environmental protection was not only a prerequisite for economic prosperity but also for the well-being of current and future generations:

> These trends pose a threat to nations' economic potential, their citizens' health, their internal political security and, in the case of global warming, their very existence… one individual's consumption or use of these resources must not be at the expense of another's; and that neither should one generation's consumption be at the expense of those following. (EAP1993, p. 79).

The idea of 'sustainable development' was introduced in 1980 by the World Conservation Strategy, which stressed the need for a "sustainable utilization of species and ecosystems" (IUCN, 1980, p. VI). Shortly after, it was taken up by the 1987 EAP, which mentioned sustainable development in relation to international development cooperation and the Lomé convention (p. 38). A few months later, it was officially propagated internationally through the Brundtland Report, published by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (United Nations, 1987). The publication promoted economic growth compatible with ecological balance as 'sustainable development.'

The incorporation of sustainable development as the guiding principle marked a significant shift in environmental policy. It brought together instrumental economic and health motives with intrinsic motives in a solid narrative (Jordan, 2008). Consequently, the 1993 EAP is the longest of all eight Action Programs, extensively outlining how EU environmental policy will be shaped according to this new rationale.

With the recognition that environmental protection is essential rather than a hindrance to economic prosperity, there has been a similar emphasis on fixing the inverse relationship between the two (Gómez-Baggethun & Naredo, 2015). Economic growth was no longer seen as a mere hindrance, but as a potential solution to environmental problems. This idea was reflected in the EAPs as early as 1987 (p. 9). Sustainability and economic growth are understood to be mutually reinforcing (EAP1993, p. 28): "Whilst it is true that there can be no sound environmental policy unless, at the same time, there is progress on the economic… front, it is equally true that there can be no lasting economic and social progress unless environmental considerations are taken into account" (EAP1987, p. 9).

This shift has led to sustainability being seen primarily as an apolitical issue with technical solutions, ignoring the underlying ideologies in favor of growth and free trade, on the assumption that it is enough to fix the economic system by including environmental externalities (Gómez-Baggethun & Naredo, 2015). Hence, whereas formerly instrumental human health and intrinsic motives were deemed incompatible with instrumental economic motives, sustainable development integrated all three into a coherent story. In that sense, increasing intrinsic framings are a veil for increasing instrumentalism. Aesthetic motives, present mostly in the first EAP, were difficult to incorporate into the sustainable development narrative, and were hence largely abandoned altogether.

Over time, relational motives gained prominence, emphasizing the protection of the planet as a whole ecosystem, encompassing both humans and non-humans. Since issues like the hole in the ozone layer, and since the 1987 EAP, climate change and the greenhouse effect, became central to the discourse, a greater focus was put on safeguarding the planet as a vast interconnected system (EAP2002, pp. 3, 12). In the most recent EAP from 2022, relational motives extend to public health concerns, as the COVID-19 crisis made evident that the health of other-than-humans is intrinsically linked to human health (p. 5). Nevertheless, these relational motivations are largely subordinate to purely instrumental and intrinsic motives (Figure 2).

How do people position themselves in relation to nature?

The change in environmental policy motives enabled a change in positionality, from humans as masters of nature to stewards of nature. Because environmental protection was increasingly seen as a requisite for economic prosperity, economic crises or the financial cost of nature protection could no longer be used as an excuse to curb ambitious environmental policy objectives. Even more so, environmental protection was promoted by former masters-over-nature for economic reasons.

The 1973 EAP exemplifies the master-over-nature stance, considering nature solely at the service of humankind, subject to exploitation without moral concerns. The document indicated a need for research on pollution's effects on human and environmental health, relying on "experiments on animals" (EAP1973, p. 36). Additionally, it advocated environmental policies such as the construction and clearing of forest roads for pedestrians, cyclists, and horseback riders (EAP1973, p. 38). The master-over-nature profile was also evident in reasoning that ambitious environmental protection measures on a national level should be allowed only if they do not hinder the realization of the Common Market (EAP1973, p. 7). This implies that nature should not be protected if it poses risks to human or economic well-being.

From the EAP of 1983 it becomes clear, given the economic distress in the aftermath of the oil crisis, that environmentalists faced increasing pressure from masters-over-nature to curb environmental action that was economically burdensome (pp. 3-4). To convince these masters-over-nature, it was necessary to stress the economic benefits of environmental action for "the deteriorating economic situation not being used as an excuse for weakening the environmental policy that is now under way" (EAP1983, p. 4). The oil crisis certainly prompted arguments for aligning environmental protection with economic gains, appealing to a broader audience, including the business sector, winning over masters-of-nature to support environmental policy even during economic crises.

A considerable drop in master-of-nature references since 1987 is also reflected in the first explicit questioning of experiments on animals for research (p. 31). The publication of the Brundtland Report further solidified the sustainable development narrative, and environmental protection became unquestionably intertwined with economic growth, reflected in a significant rise of steward-of-nature references in the 1993 EAP (Figure 3). Whereas written in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC), the 2013 EAP expressed no considerable concerns that this might curb ambitious environmental policy, compared to the 1983 EAP, written in the aftermath of the oil crisis. Instead, it promotes the 'green' and 'circular economy' concepts, highlighting the interlinkages between development, poverty alleviation, and environmental policy (EAP2013, pp.13, 22).

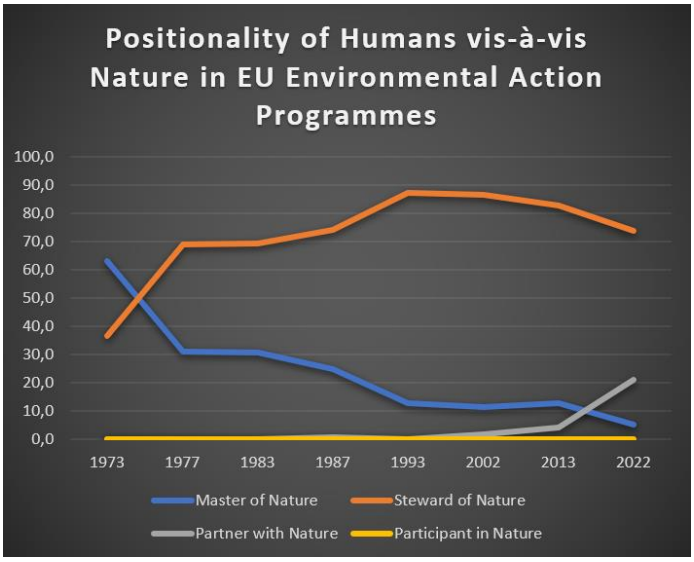

Figure 3: (own creation). Human positionality in relation to nature in EU environmental action programs.

Human-nature hierarchy does not disappear with the master-of-nature positionality. Classic stewardship arguments still consider nature subordinate to humans (Van den Born, 2008; De Groot, 2010). Furthermore, the hierarchy remains selective to certain humans. Indeed, in some instances, nature is considered more important than humans as evident in the 1987 EAP suggestion (p. 39) to control population growth in developing countries to protect natural resources. This suggestion is absent in policy internal to the EU. This inconsistency is in line with Jason Moore's theory that a Human-Nature divide consists of certain human groups (2015).

Since the 2002 EAP, occasional glimpses of a partner-with-nature stance have emerged, where human activities should not only avoid harm but also promote nature's prosperity (Figure 3). The 2013 EAP introduced the concept of green infrastructure, purporting to move beyond mere harm-avoidance to actively enhancing the natural environment (p. 10). However, the steward-of-nature's do-no-harm principle still prevails, as reflected in the idea of decoupling the economy from environmental degradation (EAP2013, p. 3). In the 2022 EAP, the partner-with-nature profile accounted for 1/5th of the total (Figure 3). Notably, this rise in a more equal positionality of humans vis-à-vis nature goes hand in hand with particular attention to inter-human equality, urging that environmental policy should leave no one behind (EAP2022, p. 9).

Overall, the evolution in motives for environmental policy led to the transformation of human positionality towards nature in EU discourse from being a master and later a steward. This may be a veil for enduring master-of-nature stances as the shift has occurred when environmental policy was considered economically rational. The human-centric perspective remained, with only occasional indications of a more equal relationship between humans and nature.

What is perceived as nature?

Throughout all EU Environmental Action Programs, representations of nature as a resource dominate, except for the last EAP from 2022 in which socio-nature outweighs the other perspectives (Figure 4). In that sense, environmental policy has mostly been considered in terms of resource management.

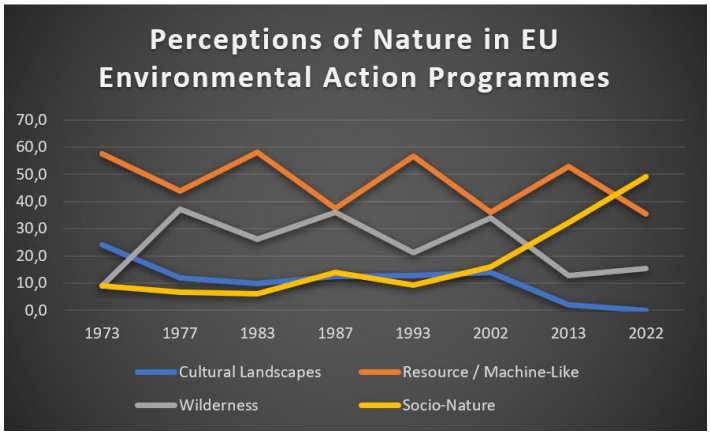

Figure 4: (own creation). Perceptions of nature in EU environmental action programs.

Initially – in line with the prominence of aesthetic and recreational anthropocentric motivations – nature was also to a considerable extent represented as an Arcadian landscape. It even comprised old, iconic city centers without any reference to green spaces, and these had to be protected from skyscrapers (EAP1973, pp. 42-43). Reference to "Europe's much admired landscape" and "our natural heritage" reflect nostalgic feelings attached to identity-building (EAP1987, p. 10; EAP1973, p. 25). This implies that iconic nature is enjoyed by people in everyday life.

Yet, since the 1977 EAP, nature has increasingly been understood as wilderness: iconic wildlife untouched by humans (EAP1977, pp. 26-29). Compared to the first EAPs, the 1993 EAP portrays agriculture as the main cause of biodiversity loss, implying a setting apart of nature faced with human interventions (p. 11). Since 1977, the share of representations of nature as wilderness alternately converged and diverged with another representation of nature as a 'resource', but the latter remained dominant (Figure 4).

Business interests and the commercial world could have played a major influence here, associating conservation with bio-/ecocentric motives (EAP1987, p. 31). To gain broader support and convince stakeholders, a strategic move was made to reframe wilderness protection as resource protection, introducing the concept of 'biodiversity.' Coined during the National Forum on Biodiversity in 1986, 'biodiversity' allowed for quantifiable conservation objectives and presented nature protection as an economic interest, making it more appealing to policymakers (Rientjes, 2002; Uggla, 2010; Andrade Franco, 2013).

The concept of biodiversity streamlined wilderness conservation with the emerging sustainable development mindset, as it enabled the calculation of monetary profit for society when an ecosystem is restored (Uggla, 2010; Andrade Franco, 2013). It offered policymakers solid arguments to further their cause. Rientjes cites J. D. Nations at the BioDiversity conference saying: "if we want to hold on to our planet's biological diversity, we have to speak the vernacular, and the vernacular is utility, economics, and the well-being of individual human beings" (2002, p. 258). She continues that "It takes nature protection out of the realm of ethics and aesthetics and presents it as a factual, even economic, interest"[2] (2002, p. 258). This transition led to national

[2] Translated from Dutch: "Het trekt natuurbescherming uit de sfeer van ethiek en esthetiek, en presenteert het als een zakelijk, zelf economisch belang."

parks not only safeguarding iconic nature but also protecting non-iconic yet resource-valuable elements, such as freshwater basins.

Building further on the idea of biodiversity conservation as resource protection, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) was established in 2012 by 94 governments with the aim to "to strengthen the science-policy interface for biodiversity and ecosystem services for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, long-term human well-being and sustainable development" (IPBES, 2023). The influence of IPBES on EU discourse becomes apparent in the 2013 EAP, which uses the terms 'ecosystem services', 'natural capital', and 'environmental goods and services' for the first time (pp. 6-7). It stems from the idea that monetarizing the services nature provides to human societies might incentivize the protection of these ecosystems.

Since the 2002 EAP, 'nature as a resource' and 'wilderness' lost a considerable share to 'socio-nature' perspectives (Figure 4; EAP2002, p. 10). This shift aligns with the trend Büscher and Fletcher identified of moving from fortress conservation to socio-nature conservation, involving humans in nature protection (2020). Although they locate the start of this trend in the 1990s, it is visible in EU environmental policy only a decade later. Gradually, with climate change as an important new dimension of environmental policy, biodiversity protection was increasingly portrayed as a climate mitigation strategy (Dupont, 2010, p. 9). Consequently, nature as wilderness was brought back into human circles in the form of, for example, green infrastructure, and eco-agriculture (EAP2013, p. 10). Nature was understood as everything around humans, including insects and city flora. Yet, contrary to seeing nature as an Arcadian landscape, it is no longer firmly linked to nostalgic landscapes. Typical examples of nature-*based* solutions are rainwater harvesting systems, or food forests. Other examples include urban green spaces and so-called wild gardens. The culmination of this trend is observed in the 2022 EAP, where representations of socio-nature have surpassed resource-centric depictions (Figure 4).

Hence, instead of seeing a back-to-the-barriers scenario as outlined by Büscher and Fletcher (2020), a back-to-conservation-with-humans scenario is observable in EU environmental policy from 1973-2022: from arcadian landscapes, to wilderness, to socio-nature.

5. Discussion

I have examined interactions among three dimensions of the human-nature relationship – reasons for the protection of nature, human-nature hierarchies, and views of nature – by assessing them against a relational-divide ontological scale. To capture these interactions, this discussion section introduces four human-nature profiles (A, B, C, and D) that represent particular combinations of positions within each of these three dimensions, aiming to comprehensively portray the multifaceted nature of the human-nature relationship. The article finds that the EU has shifted profiles over time, with profiles B and C being the most dominant.

For profile A, environmental policy is considered a luxurious preoccupation to better human lives. It suggested that European nations could afford to put progress and the environment at the service of their citizens now that a certain economic prosperity had been achieved – a narrative that fits well within the EU's modernization discourse. The EAP from 1973 is exemplary:

> …economic expansion is not an end in itself: its first aim should be to enable disparities in living conditions to be reduced. It must take place with the participation of all the social partners. It should result in an improvement in the quality of life as well as in standards of living. As befits the genius of Europe, particular attention will be given to intangible values and to protecting the environment so that progress may really be put at the service of mankind (p. 5).

This profile A has a high share of (1) master-over-nature references (2) instrumental motives like recreation, aesthetics, and human health, and (3) nature as an Arcadian landscape (Figure 5).

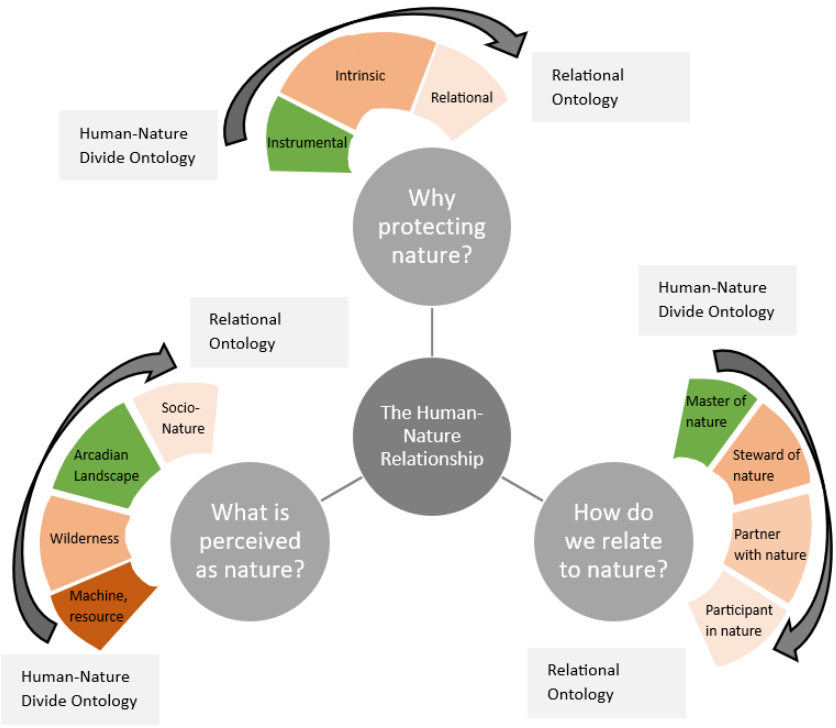

Figure 5: (own creation). Situating profile A on the human-nature ontology spectrum.
Note: The green color indicates the dominant position within each dimension of the human-nature relationship for this profile. The orange color gradient represents the spectrum of human-nature ontologies: the darker the shade of orange, the more the position leans toward a human-nature divide ontology; the lighter the shade, the more it tends toward a relational ontology.

For Profile B, environmental policy is not a luxurious preoccupation, but an economic necessity. A rational exploitation of all available resources is indispensable to safeguard economic growth. Equally, economic prosperity is deemed essential for environmental prosperity. This profile dominates in the 1977, 1983, 1993, and 2013 EAPs. It would also appear dominant in the Green Deal if considered in isolation from the 8th EAP.

> Against the background of deepening concern for the environment and natural resources, and realisation of the negative economic effects of environmental degradation, it is now clear that environmentally sound industry is no longer a matter of luxury but rather a matter of necessity. (EAP1993, p. 24)

Profile B combines a high share of (1) steward-of-nature references (2) instrumental economic motives (3) and considerations of nature as a resource (Figure 6). When combined with an instrumental survival motive to safeguard well-being for future generations, this profile overlaps with the sustainable development narrative, particularly present in the 1993 and 2013 EAPs and the Green Deal.

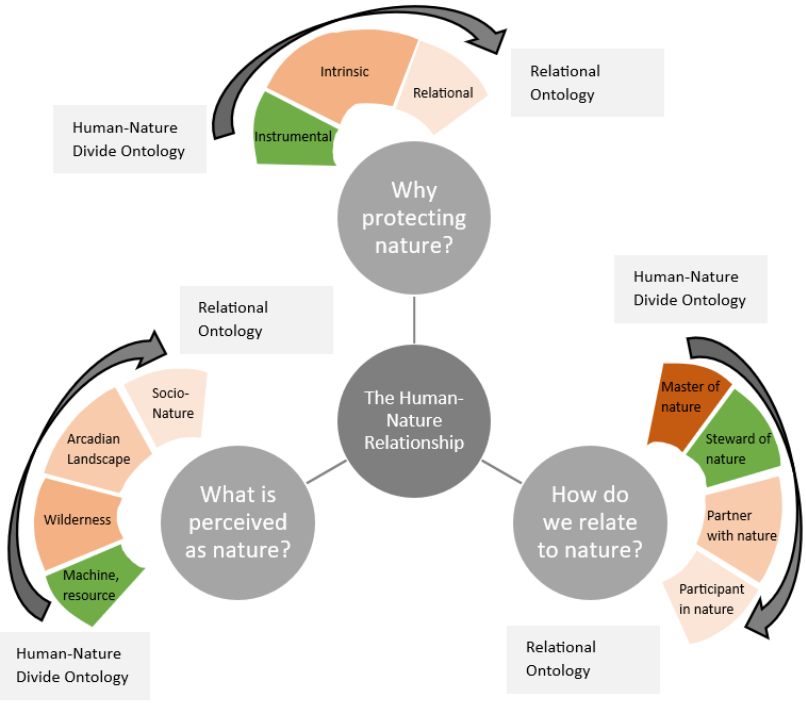

Figure 6: (own creation). Situating the profile B on the human-nature ontology spectrum. *Note:* The green color indicates the dominant position within each dimension of the human-nature relationship for this profile. The orange color gradient represents the spectrum of human-nature ontologies: the darker the shade of orange, the more the position leans toward a human-nature divide ontology; the lighter the shade, the more it tends toward a relational ontology.

Profile C dominates in the 1987 and 2002 EAPs. Next to resource management to safeguard economic growth, considerable attention is given to wilderness conservation, combined with a considerable share of intrinsic motives which are only 1,4% less represented than instrumental ones in the 2002 EAP (Figure 7):

> A prudent use of natural resources and the protection of the global eco-system together with economic prosperity and a balanced social development are a condition for sustainable development…. encouraging regional climate modelling and assessments both to prepare regional adaptation measures such as water resources management, conservation of biodiversity, desertification and flooding prevention and to support awareness raising among citizens and business. (p. 1)

Profile C is a combination of a high share of (1) steward-of-nature profiles (2) instrumental economic and survival motives in combination with intrinsic objectives (3) nature sen as a resource, in combination with nature as wilderness (Figure 7). This profile represents the success-story of rendering biodiversity conservation attractive for those in business circles' and policymakers' economic interests.

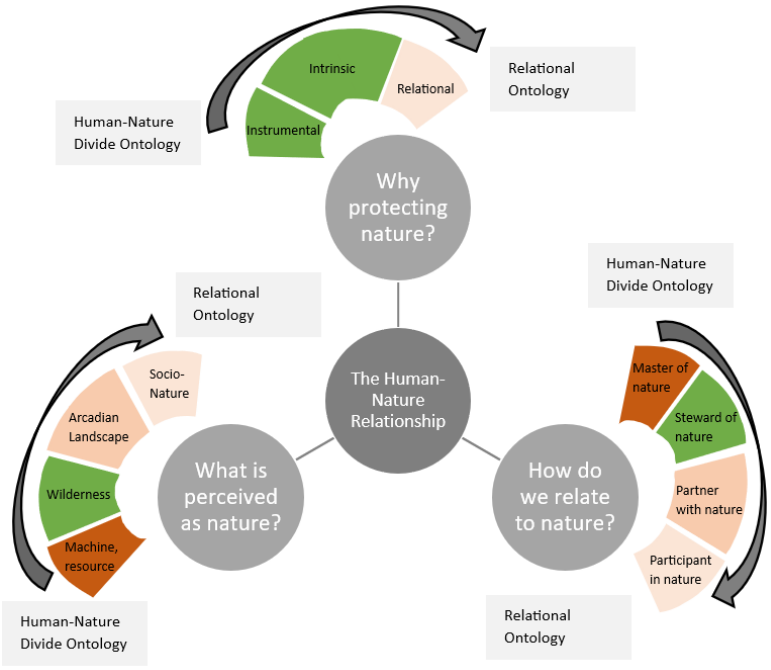

Figure 7: (own creation). Situating profile C on the human-nature ontology spectrum.

Note: The green color indicates the dominant position within each dimension of the human-nature relationship for this profile. The orange color gradient represents the spectrum of human-nature ontologies: the darker the shade of orange, the more the position leans toward a human-nature divide ontology; the lighter the shade, the more it tends toward a relational ontology.

Profile D appears for the first time in the last EAP from 2022. It sets nature-based solutions, instead of strict nature conservation, at the core of its planetary survival strategy. This means intra-human injustices are to be tackled, and nature is to a far lesser extent framed as an exploitable realm for the service of humankind when compared to the EAPs from the 1970s.

> The 8th EAP should accelerate the green transition, in a just and inclusive way, to a climate-neutral, sustainable, non-toxic, resource-efficient, renewable energy-based, resilient and competitive circular economy that gives back to the planet more than it takes. (EAP2022 p. 3)

Profile D combines a high share of (1) steward-of-nature positions, in combination with partner-with-nature references (2) a motivation of instrumental economic actions and survival, and (3) observing nature as socio-nature (Figure 8).

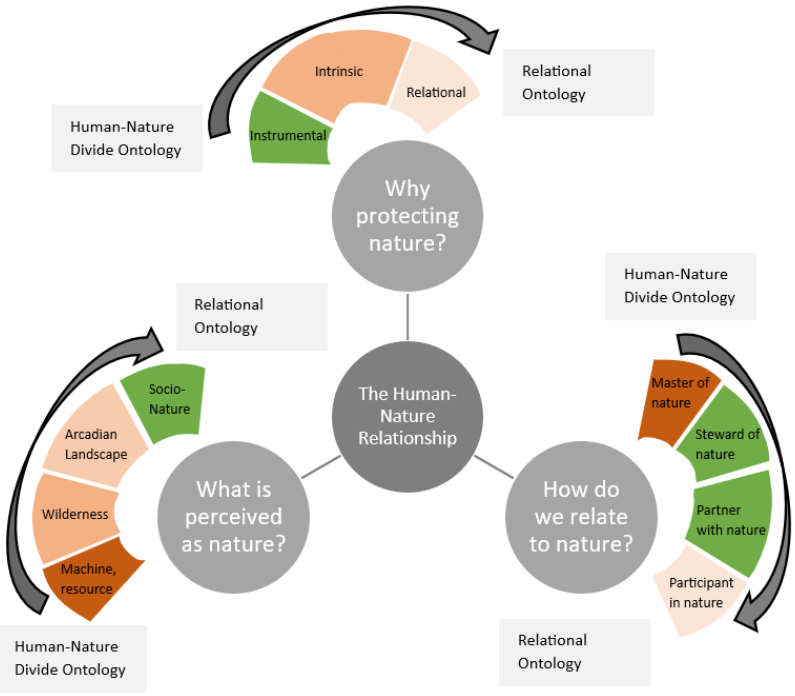

Figure 8: (own creation). Situating profile D on the human-nature ontology spectrum.

Note: The green color indicates the dominant position within each dimension of the human-nature relationship for this profile. The orange color gradient represents the spectrum of human-nature ontologies: the darker the shade of orange, the more the position leans toward a human-nature divide ontology; the lighter the shade, the more it tends toward a relational ontology.

These different profiles challenge simplistic views of the human-nature divide ontology in EU environmental policy, highlighting its complexity. A straightforward shift from a human-nature divide to a relational ontology did not take place. The data show that while the divide may disappear in one dimension, it might persist or resurface in others. In sum, it is omnipresent, but manifest in different ways.

6. Conclusions

This article contributed to Political Ecology scholarship by challenging apolitical perspectives on environmental policy through a detailed examination of the evolution of the human-nature divide ontology in the EU's environmental policy. By examining three key dimensions of the human-nature relationship, I have demonstrated the need to unpack this relationship to grasp its nuanced evolution. Specific combinations of these dimensions constitute four identified human-nature relationship profiles.

Based on an analysis of all eight EU Environmental Action Programs and the Green Deal, the article has illustrated how the EU consistently sought to legitimize established power relations and economic growth values by coopting ecological voices concerned with how the status quo exploits and harms nature. It demonstrates a continuous effort to align environmental policy and nature protection with instrumental motives, to avoid using financial costs and economic burdens as an excuse to limit ambitious environmental policy, while

preserving human exceptionalism and the economic growth paradigm. The paradigm of sustainable development and the biodiversity concept have been employed as two clear strategies in this regard.

This allowed policymakers with a master-of-nature mindset to adopt the role of stewards-of-nature, acknowledging the environmental crisis, while retaining mastery over nature. The oil crisis from 1979 was an important turning point in this regard. On the contrary, the 2008 financial crisis and the European Green Deal do not result in considerable changes to the discourse on human-nature relations. The last Environmental Action Plan produced in 2022 did have traces of a partner-with-nature profile, implying a more equal relationship between humans and nature. Furthermore, socio-nature, in which humans and nature share the same ecosystem, outweighs both wilderness conservation and resource management in the discourse. Nevertheless, the Action Plan maintains a strong neoliberal overtone with instrumental economic motives.

Considering the socio-environmental injustices that have resulted from EU environmental policies such as fortress conservation initiatives and a carbon credit market based on a human-nature divide ontology as highlighted by PE scholarship, to what extent does EU environmental policy already contain the foundations for a shift towards a relational human-nature ontology? A relational human-nature ontology is believed to foster synergies between local communities and nature conservation while critiquing the commodification of nature. It is present in the latest EAP which has more features of partner-with-nature and socio-nature discourses. Yet, the deeply ingrained view of nature as a resource, and instrumental economic motives, impede the full crystallization of a relational human-nature ontology and will likely further support policies such as the carbon credit market, based on the idea of commodifiable other-than-humans at the service of certain human groups.

There is a basis here for further politico-ecological, politico-ontological and post-development research on the effects of EU environmental policies on stakeholders' lifeworlds. Particular human-nature relationship profiles can inform further empirical research into EU environmental or development policy. They promote certain policies and discourage others, despite being presented in the EAPs as value-neutral. There is a danger that EU environmental policy is taking on neo-colonial overtones, by depoliticizing its conception of the human-nature relationship as common sense or as a norm, imposed on project stakeholders through policy actions. Dominant human-nature ontologies, political struggles, and material realities are sidestepped.

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Annex 1&2

PROFILE A	**EU Environmental Action Programme 1973 Human-Nature Relationship Axis**			
	Human-Nature Divide <-> Relational Ontology			
	Master 63,3%	Steward 36,7%	Partner 0,0%	Participant 0,0%
	Machine-Resource 57,6%	Wilderness 9,1%	Arcadian Landscapes 24,2%	Socio-nature 9,1%
	Instrumental 73,7%	Intrinsic 24,2%	Relational 2,1%	
PROFILE B	**EU Environmental Action Programme 1977 Human-Nature Relationship Axis**			
	Human-Nature Divide <-> Relational Ontology			
	Master 31,1%	Steward 68,9%	Partner 0,0%	Participant 0,0%
	Machine-Resource 44%	Wilderness 37,3%	Arcadian Landscapes 12%	Socio-nature 6,7%
	Instrumental 58,4%	Intrinsic 36,7%	Relational 4,8%	
PROFILE B	**EU Environmental Action Programme 1983 Human-Nature Relationship Axis**			
	Human-Nature Divide <-> Relational Ontology			
	Master 30,8%	Steward 69,2%	Partner 0,0%	Participant 0,0%
	Machine-Resource 58%	Wilderness 26%	Arcadian Landscapes 10%	Socio-nature 6%
	Instrumental 62,9%	Intrinsic 37,1%	Relational 0,0%	
PROFILE C	**EU Environmental Action Programme 1987 Human-Nature Relationship Axis**			
	Human-Nature Divide <-> Relational Ontology			
	Master 25%	Steward 74,2%	Partner 0,8%	Participant 0,0%
	Machine-Resource 37,5%	Wilderness 35,9%	Arcadian Landscapes 12,5%	Socio-nature 14,1%
	Instrumental 52,8%	Intrinsic 44,4%	Relational 2,8%	
PROFILE B	**EU Environmental Action Programme 1993 Human-Nature Relationship Axis**			
	Human-Nature Divide <-> Relational Ontology			
	Master 12,8%	Steward 87,2%	Partner 0,0%	Participant 0,0%
	Machine-Resource 56,8%	Wilderness 21,2%	Arcadian Landscapes 12,7%	Socio-nature 9,3%
	Instrumental 59,4%	Intrinsic 33,5%	Relational 7,2%	

PROFILE C	**EU Environmental Action Programme 2002 Human-Nature Relationship Axis**			
	Human-Nature Divide <-> Relational Ontology			
	Master 11,5%	Steward 86,5%	Partner 1,9%	Participant 0,0%
	Machine-Resource 36%	Wilderness 34%	Arcadian Landscapes 14%	Socio-nature 16%
	Instrumental 46%	Intrinsic 44,6%	Relational 9,4%	
PROFILE B	**EU Environmental Action Programme 2013 Human-Nature Relationship Axis**			
	Human-Nature Divide <-> Relational Ontology			
	Master 12,9%	Steward 82,9%	Partner 4,3%	Participant 0,0%
	Machine-Resource 52,9%	Wilderness 12,7%	Arcadian Landscapes 2%	Socio-nature 32,4%
	Instrumental 56,9%	Intrinsic 36,8%	Relational 6,3%	
PROFILE D	**EU Environmental Action Programme 2022 + Green Deal Human-Nature Relationship Axis**			
	Human-Nature Divide <-> Relational Ontology			
	Master 5,3%	Steward 73,7%	Partner 21,1%	Participant 0,0%
	Machine-Resource 35,4%	Wilderness 15,4%	Arcadian Landscapes 0,0%	Socio-nature 49,2%
	Instrumental 53,1%	Intrinsic 28,6%	Relational 18,4%	
PROFILE D	**EU Environmental Action Programme 2022 Human-Nature Relationship Axis**			
	Human-Nature Divide <-> Relational Ontology			
	Master 5,7%	Steward 60,0%	Partner 34,3%	Participant 0,0%
	Machine-Resource 16,0%	Wilderness 12,0%	Arcadian Landscapes 0,0%	Socio-nature 72,0%
	Instrumental 51,1%	Intrinsic 23,4%	Relational 25,5%	
PROFILE B	**Green Deal Human-Nature Relationship Axis**			
	Human-Nature Divide <-> Relational Ontology			
	Master 4,5%	Steward 95,5%	Partner 0,0%	Participant 0,0%
	Machine-Resource 47,5%	Wilderness 17,5%	Landscapes 0,0%	Socio-nature 35,0%
	Instrumental 54%	Intrinsic 31,0%	Relational 15,0%	

Table 2: (own creation). Summary of empirical findings from the discourse analysis tracing human-nature relationships in three dimensions across the eight EU environmental action programs and the EU Green Deal.

Note: The color gradient illustrates the prevalence of positions within each of the three dimensions of the human-nature divide: darker shades of orange indicate a higher presence of the position, while lighter shades signify a lower presence. Based on this information, the human-nature profile is provided for each document.

Coding Scheme 1: Why Protecting Nature?

Human-Nature **Divide Ontology** ⟷ Human-Nature **Relational Ontology**

Instrumental	Intrinsic	Relational
Nature is protected to safeguard the services it provides to humanity and to safeguard human lives and the persistence of the human race. "Water is essential for human life and has numerous functions which are indispensable to man, who uses it for many different purposes." EAP1993: p.9 "RECOGNIZES that the protection of the environment can help to improve economic growth and facilitate job creation" EAP1987: p.2	*Nature is protected because of the intrinsic value of non-human nature, plants, animals, and ecosystems, without reference to their utility for humans.* "For this reason — as well as because of its intrinsic importance and high public support — the theme of nature protection will feature prominently in the activities to be undertaken during the European Year of the Environment." EAP1987: p.31	*nature is protected for human and more-than-human nature in their co-existence, without making the distinction explicit.* "The Report on the State of the Environment also clearly indicates some trends which, if not satisfactorily contained, could have significant negative consequences for the quality of the environment as a whole. For example,... Atmospheric Pollution:... serious problems continue to exist... on one hand, a number of 'greenhouse' gases such as, carbon dioxide, nitrous oxides, ozone and methane, and on the other hand, air quality problems" EAP1993, p.23

Coding Scheme 2: How Do We Relate To Nature?

Human-Nature **Divide Ontology** ⟷ Human-Nature **Relational Ontology**

Master of Nature	Steward of Nature	Partner with Nature	Participant in Nature
The Master of nature sees no point in protecting nature if it is harmful/difficult/has negative consequences for humans or the economy. It can manage nature without moral constraints The evaluation of the risks to health and the ecology... is based on the knowledge of the effects of the polluting agents and nuisances on the health of man and his environment... It comes mostly from toxicological research, clinical observations, **experiments on animals**, epidemiological surveys and ecological and socioeconomic studies. EAP1973, p.35-36. Bold added. "This Community environment policy aims, as far as possible, at the coordinated and harmonized progress of national policies without hampering, potential or actual progress at the national level; such progress should, however, be made in such a way as not to jeopardize the proper functioning of the common market." EAP1987: p.42	*The Steward of nature believes that protecting nature should be a fundamental side-effect of human and economic progress: do-no-harm principle* "The Programme aims to achieve a decoupling between environmental pressures and economic growth whilst being consistent with the principle of subsidiarity and respecting the diversity of conditions across the various regions of the European Union." EAP2002: p.1	*The Partner with nature believes we should give back to nature more then we take: we should actively enhance nature through interacting with it.* "The 8th EAP should accelerate the green transition, in a just and inclusive way, to a climate-neutral, sustainable, nontoxic, resource-efficient, renewable energy-based, resilient and competitive circular economy that gives back to the planet more than it takes." EAP2022: p.24	*For the Participant of nature the bond between the self and nature is very important, it co-constitutes the self. Without nature, humans cease to exist, not because they depend on natural resources, but because nature is part of the self.* /

Coding Scheme 3: What Do We Perceive As Nature?

Human-Nature **Divide Ontology** ⟷ Human-Nature **Relational Ontology**

Machine-Resource	Wilderness	Arcadian Landscape	Socio-Nature
Lifeless nature, dead matter, resources at the service of humans "since the reservoir of raw materials is finite, the flow of substances through the various stages of processing, consumption and use should be so managed as to facilitate or encourage optimum reuse and recycling, thereby avoiding wastage and preventing depletion of the natural resource stock" EAP1993: p.12	*Vast, pristine, virgin nature, fixed in time, untouched by humans.* "The need to safeguard the marine wilderness" EPA1983: p15 "the conservation of wild birds" EPA1987: p.3	*Nostalgic landscapes of semi-nature, valued for its aesthetics and sense of nationalism, and in which human interventions are exalted.* "Our architectural and natural heritage is ... an important element in its environment and the major physical manifestation of the cultural and historical identity of Europe" EPA1977, p.24	*The natural environment in our direct surroundings. A place in which humans and more-than humans co-habit, without particular nostalgic or identity-building features.* "making full use of ecosystem approaches and green infrastructure, including biodiversity-friendly nature based solutions, whilst also ensuring that their implementation restores biodiversity and enhances ecosystem integrity and connectivity, has clear societal co-benefits" EPA2022, p.32

Table 3: (own creation). Three coding schemes for analyzing human-nature relations positioned on the dividing-relational ontology spectrum: expanded version of table 1 with empirical examples.

Note: The orange color gradient represents the human-nature ontology spectrum: the darker the shade of orange, the more the position leans toward a human-nature divide ontology; the lighter the shade, the more it tends toward a relational ontology.