

Where ecospirituality is grounded: Nature as place

**Author:**Knut-Willy Sæther^{1,2} **Affiliations:**

¹Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Volda University College, Volda, Norway

²Research Institute for Theology and Religion, College of Human Science, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Knut-Willy Sæther,
knut-willy.saether@hivolda.no

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Place is a fundamental dimension of human existence, yet its meaning remains complex and contested across disciplines. This article examines how the notion of nature as place can be understood as a core category within ecospirituality. Drawing on selected interdisciplinary themes from ecophilosophy and ecotheology, the article argues that the significance of nature as place in ecospirituality can be articulated through a conceptual trajectory that includes the physical-geographical concreteness of place, the interrelation between humans and nature, the cultivation of emotional awareness and ultimately the transformative potential of aesthetic experiences in nature.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Taken together, these perspectives offer valuable resources for a deeper understanding of nature as place in ecospirituality and demonstrate that nature as place functions as a precondition for fostering ethical awareness of our surrounding nature.

Keywords: ecospirituality; ecophilosophy; ecotheology; place; space; awareness; aesthetic experiences.

Introduction

Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. (Casey 2013:ix)

With such a statement, Edward Casey asserts that place is something fundamental to human existence. At the same time, there arises a need to clarify what the notion of place encompasses, a task that quickly proves to be far from straightforward. Within academic discourse, place as a thematic concept is most closely associated with the discipline of geography. Yet even within geography's various subfields, the notion of place remains challenging to define, as Castree (2009:156) observes: 'Place is among the most complex of geographical ideas'. In recent decades, the concept has attracted particular attention across a range of disciplines through the so-called spatial turn. This development also introduces the challenge of how to understand both the notions of place and space and how they relate to one another.

It is hardly coincidental that the growing focus on place and space across many disciplines coincides with recent decades' emphasis on environmental challenges and the current climate crisis. In this context, the understanding of place is directed towards nature as place, a tendency evident in numerous eco-discourses. This article aims to argue that the notion of place can be understood as a fundamental category for one of those discourses, namely ecospirituality. With this objective, I seek to demonstrate how nature as place can be unpacked in this context. I will pursue this aim through the following exploring steps.

Firstly, as a necessary point of departure, I will offer some reflections on my own geographical context and how my sense of belonging to it, provides both a backdrop and a guiding perspective for my exploration of nature as place. Secondly, I will unpack the notion of ecospirituality as it pertains to my argument. Such clarification is essential for demonstrating that nature as place constitutes an intrinsic theme within ecospirituality. Thirdly, this discussion will lead to a more in-depth examination of nature as place, particularly considering the spatial turn, and to the claim that both the notions of place and space acquire meaning when considered in relation to nature.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Echoes of eco-discourses' under the expert guidance of guest editor Prof. Wessel Bentley.

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Fourthly, I continue my exploration by focusing on two streams of thought which are strongly related to ecospirituality: ecophilosophy and ecotheology. These two streams of thoughts provide resources that are highly relevant because they offer insights into a more profound understanding of what nature as place can encompass in the context of ecospirituality. I am fully aware of the differences and tensions between these streams of thought, as the philosophical and theological *grounds* for understanding nature as place differ. For example, ecotheology is typically articulated within the particular frameworks of Christian theological or faith traditions, which shape its interpretive horizons.

Finally, I will synthesise selected key themes from the material analysed to identify how nature as place can be understood as a fundamental topic for ecospirituality. My contribution will by no means constitute an exhaustive account of either nature as place or the full scope of ecospirituality, but I will attempt to show initial approaches to how nature as place can be conceived as a core topic for ecospirituality.

My exploration is thus explorative and conceptual in the sense that it synthesises insights from various scholars and disciplinary traditions relevant to my thematic focus. At the same time, parts of my contribution to the topic are empirically informed, drawing on insights from recent research – in particular on aesthetic experiences in nature. This does not involve an inductive or generalising form of reasoning based on these studies; rather, they – together with the theoretical contributions – contribute to a more in-depth account of the significance of nature as place for ecospirituality.

From the place we all must start

Addressing the importance of place without being consciously aware of, and taking into account, one's own contextual backdrop would represent a weakness. Any exploration of how nature as place can be understood will inevitably be influenced by our own point of departure, particularly in terms of geographical context. We carry with us our own encounters with nature from the regions we are familiar with. Our knowledge and experience of nature provide frames of reference and a vocabulary for what we conceive nature to be and the qualities we attribute to it. Consequently, our experiences of nature are marked by different types of landscapes in a distinctly geographical sense, such as coastal areas, deserts, mountains or forests.

My geographical background and context are rooted in Norway. The Norwegian landscape and natural environment are embedded in my identity. The physical geography of Norway lives within me, and I have always had a strong interest in nature. Natural phenomena characteristic of my home country – mountains, valleys, fjords, glaciers, rivers and distinct seasons – form part of my experiential world. I have grown accustomed to this landscape, at times even

taking it for granted, yet it continues to affect me profoundly. It still evokes aesthetic experiences of novelty and wonder and even exerts a spiritual influence. All of this constitutes my points of reference.

Despite my predispositions shaped by geographical background, I believe that my reflections on nature as place can offer insights that resonate more broadly for others who are familiar with different natural and geographical environments. My aim is precisely to highlight possible common resources for understanding nature as place.

With what I have outlined above, I have already given the notion of place a clear physical-geographical identification. At the same time, it is implicitly evident how I approach the highly multifaceted notion of nature. A full discussion of the concept of nature would go far beyond the scope of this article. For present purposes, and as a provisional yet sufficient clarification, nature is understood as a description of the surrounding environment within the human–nature encounter. This means that nature is, for now, defined as the surrounding natural environment that humans encounter through their senses and experiences. In the first instance, this surrounding nature expresses the specific place associated with the concept of nature.

This surrounding nature is hardly untouched in any qualified sense; nevertheless, my focus here is on the surrounding nature as experienced by us, even if it is to varying degrees influenced by human activity. Though culturally impacted nature is mostly present, it still makes sense to operate with this provisional understanding of nature for the purposes of this discussion.

Another issue concerns the range of the surrounding nature in the human–nature encounter. Is it the nearby nature, and what, then, constitutes nearby nature? Such delimitations and clarifications may have some merit; however, I will avoid overly precise definitions, as they risk constraining the core of what nature as place might signify. Nature is not a static entity 'out there'; rather, it is dynamic in several ways. It is important to keep in mind what I call a process of zooming in and out. In essence, this means that our perspective can shift from close-up details, such as flowers, to broader landscapes, or even to the Earth as a whole. This dynamic way of viewing nature also resonates in the various discourses of ecophilosophy, ecotheology and ecospirituality.

The 'eco' and 'spiritual' of ecospirituality

Ecospirituality has developed within a wide range of academic and practical contexts. It is therefore more appropriate to speak of multiple forms of *ecospiritualities*. For instance, it emerges as an extension of ecophilosophy and ecotheology, appears in disciplines such as psychology, health and nursing, environmentalism and becomes a thematic concern within frameworks such as ecofeminism.

That ecospirituality is an ambiguous notion is hardly surprising, given that both the prefix 'eco' and the term 'spirituality' are themselves highly contested terms. Nevertheless, the prefix 'eco' refers to what is most central in all eco-discourses; ecology, understood as the science of relationships between the physical environment and living organisms. In the context of ecospirituality, the notion of ecology indicates the scientific locus of ecospirituality and the ecological insights that must be considered.

However, within ecospirituality, ecology is not treated merely as knowledge for its own sake. Rather, it is addressed within an environmental framework shaped by a particular agenda. Ecospirituality therefore represents an orientation that emphasises environmental issues in relation to the ecological crisis and its possible solutions (Sæther 2023:18–21). This agenda may take many forms and be articulated in different ways – for example, as a critique of materialistic society or as an appeal to spirituality as a dimension for addressing the ecological crisis.

The concept of spirituality is equally fluid and can take on different shapes within various contexts. Though extensively discussed and problematised in research, and encompassing a wide range of topics, I adopt here a relatively inclusive definition: 'conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives' (Waaajman 2002:311). My aim is not to restrict the discussion to any tradition of spirituality, such as Christian spirituality, but to employ a broad approach that remains meaningful within the context of ecospirituality (Lesniak 2005:8).

The connection between spirituality and place is not explicitly evident in the foregoing definition. Spirituality is often associated with experiences that transcend the self and is frequently linked to mysticism and inner emotions or longings. This gives the impression that spirituality is detached from place. Whilst there may be some truth to this, spiritual experiences always occur within a geographical and cultural context of their time and place. (Lesniak 2005:7–12). Upon reflection, this is not particularly controversial, since spirituality is rooted in human lived experience – and lived experience invariably unfolds in specific places and times.

It is precisely this emphasis on place that I find compelling here. As Campbell (2024:279) observes, 'people have places that matter to them personally. These are sites that hold memories and meaning and that shape our ethical commitments'. In this light, it becomes meaningful to speak of a form of *grounded spirituality* to borrow the title of Brown (2019). It is therefore reasonable in one sense to say that ecospirituality keeps spirituality grounded. Smith (2009) observes that ecospirituality represents a missing dimension in spirituality, and it is also a relatively new term compared to other spiritualities (Wheeler 2022). With the prefix 'eco', the emphasis on place, understood broadly, becomes evident. In this regard, Wheeler's (2022) articulation of ecospirituality offers valuable insight:

the root meaning of 'eco' – ecological spirituality or ecospirituality describes how one relates to the sacred within the context of our natural, global and even cosmic ecosystems (or homes) of which we all form a part. (p. 1)

This clarification, where the term sacred is included, may evoke associations with some form of religious spirituality. However, ecospirituality is not necessarily religious. In relation to my exploration in this article, I understand ecospirituality as resonating with a wide spectrum of worldviews, encompassing both religious and non-religious perspectives. Such an inclusive approach aligns with Valerie Lincoln, who describes ecospirituality as a holistically based environmentalism (Lincoln 2000). Further, in clarifying the spiritual dimension, Lincoln characterises ecospirituality as 'a manifestation of the spiritual interconnection between human beings and the environment' (Lincoln 2000:228), where humans develop a deep awareness of their ecospiritual relationship.

In one sense, we might speak of what Ricci (ed. 2019:x) calls an *ecospiritual worldview*. Importantly, by this term, I do not mean a totalising or exhaustive account of reality. Rather, it refers to an informed and consciously adopted perspective – an *orientation* or way of perceiving and interpreting the world. What makes it fruitful to speak of ecospirituality as an orientation for perceiving and interpreting the world is that it is always rooted in a particular place. It is an orientation from somewhere – from where we situate ourselves. Consequently, a broad approach to ecospirituality can be enriched by insights from diverse thinkers and traditions, such as from ecophilosophy and ecotheology.

Criticism may be raised against such an approach to ecospirituality, insofar as it risks becoming overly conceptual and functioning as a too broad umbrella concept. It may also fail to sufficiently acknowledge the internal tensions present within the scholarly resources on which it draws. These tensions are important to keep in mind. Nevertheless, my concern here is to highlight a specific thematic focus on nature as place – one that is also empirically informed.

Place and space: Ambiguity and intersections

I have already indicated that both place and space are ambiguous notions. As Kilickrivan, Algeria and Haddrell (eds. 2012:vii) have observed, both are 'incredibly mobile in that they resist any single way of thinking'. Though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, there are nuances worth considering. From geography, the spatial turn has extended into other disciplines and now influences a wide range of fields within the humanities and social sciences (Nieuwenhuis & Crouch 2017; Warf & Arias 2008).

Lefebvre (1991) describes space as a social construction that shapes perceptions and practices. Whilst Lefebvre was not the first to expand the spatial turn beyond geography, he remains one of its most influential voices. Underlying this

constructivist understanding is a rejection of space as a mere container with predetermined content – a critique of René Descartes's duality of *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, where space is conceived as a real, mind-independent entity. This view, though articulated differently, is also evident in Isaac Newton's later conception of space.

According to Lefebvre, space manifests in different modes: conceived space, perceived space and lived space. All are social constructs because space is produced through social practices. Building on Lefebvre, Soja (1996) developed his notions of first-space, second-space and third-space: the first refers to the physical, geographical and material dimension; the second to imagined or conceptualised space; and the third to the interplay of the two. The difficulty of drawing clear boundaries between these dimensions is evident in Peter Nynäs's argument for a 'tripartite synthesis of physical, mental, and social spaces operating simultaneously' (Nynäs 2008:158). The phrase 'operating simultaneously' underscores their intrinsic interweaving.

Undoubtedly, the spatial turn provides valuable insights into the understanding of space and gives us resources for how the physical nature can be interpreted. The human–nature encounter is unquestionably a lived experience, as it generates interpretations, creativity and imagination. However, the constructivist shift can be criticised for partially losing sight of the concrete geographical and physical dimension of space. Casey (2013) goes further, claiming that there has been a suppression of place in exchange for space. According to Casey, in the past three centuries of Western modernity – due to developments in the natural and social sciences and discourses on mobility – place has come to be regarded as regressive and trivial. Hence, there is, in one sense, according to Ojeifo (2025), a crisis of place today. Casey argues that the notion of place must therefore be reintroduced into spatial discussions. I find merit in this critique, yet we should not exclude the notion of space when approaching the human–nature encounter as place.

Furthermore, it makes sense to conceive space as a notion encompassing multiple geographical, creative and mental dimensions – making it adequate to use the notion of nature as space. As Cox (2021) suggests, we can speak of physical-geographical space as expressing the vertical dimension of the natural environment. According to Cox, space in this sense concerns geographical phenomena such as air rising over mountains or water flowing downhill. Cox's view implies that space includes a verticality to place. Does this stand in contrast to Casey's critique? I do not think so. Rather, it illustrates that the use of *place* and *space* is fluid, even as the notions 'pull' in slightly different directions, as place has a more concrete focus and space is more abstract (Štěch 2023:58).

Therefore, when addressing the notion of nature as place, I emphasise that the physical-geographical context serves as a point of departure from which other dimensions of space and place can be developed. This is particularly relevant when we focus on the human–nature encounter, where both space and place are received and interpreted in specific ways.

The concreteness of place: Insights from ecophilosophy

In what follows, I limit my analysis to one of the most central thinkers within ecophilosophy, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, and explore his approach to nature as place by focusing on the physical-geographical dimension. Referring to Næss as an ecophilosopher is relatively unproblematic, even though his contribution to environmental discourse is often described as a specific form of ecosophy. Both ecophilosophy and ecosophy must be understood in close relation to the environmental challenges of the 1970s. Ecosophy is typically employed in a more normative and personal sense, and partly action-oriented, whereas ecophilosophy tends to be more descriptive. However, this distinction is not entirely adequate, since ecophilosophy also contains normative elements insofar as it seeks to provide insights that aim to change humans' relationship with nature. A third concept closely related to these two is deep ecology. It is more closely tied to ecosophy, yet it is generally understood as a specific – and more radical – form of ecosophy. In what follows, when unpacking Næss' notion of place, I will use the term ecophilosophy in a way that includes a normative dimension. This usage also corresponds to the understanding underlying ecotheology, to which I will return later.

In the first section of *Ecology of Wisdom*, entitled 'Places in the Real World', Næss turns his attention to concrete places and phenomena in nature and in particular to his place and simple cabin, Tvergastein, located in a remote area high in the Norwegian mountains (Næss 2010:45). That Tvergastein became the place Næss made his own in the highlands of Norway is hardly coincidental – at least not the fact that it lies far up in the mountainous region. As one of Norway's most prominent mountaineers, often referred to as one of the mountaineering philosophers (Wold 2023), the landscape of mountains as a place is entirely natural for Næss. Yet one factor lends this site special significance for him. Already at the age of five, he writes, he was deeply fascinated by this particular mountain area, where the most majestic massif – Hallingskarvet – towers above the surrounding landscape.

Næss provides a detailed description of the concrete geographical landscape of the area. He offers a physical-geographical account – both in time and place – of the surroundings (Næss 2010:46). Beginning with the grand narrative of the Ice Age, he then focuses on landforms in greater detail – mountains, slopes and lakes – before turning to the immediate vicinity of the cabin, describing its flora and fauna, as well as the cabin itself and the human conditions of life there. In these descriptions, Næss elaborates the notion of place as something concrete in a physical-geographical sense.

This physical concreteness, framed within the overarching context of the mountain, might suggest that Næss conceives of place as a somewhat static entity. However, this is not the case. Two points need to be emphasised. A place as a location is a site where natural processes occur. Næss adopts what I

will describe as an ecological gaze on the area, relating his descriptions to biological and meteorological phenomena, thereby demonstrating that nature's processes are dynamic. Particularly significant are his accounts of life processes within the diversity of biological forms – a theme that runs through his development of deep ecology. In this sense, there is a dynamic aspect to what is physically given in nature.

In addition, Næss introduces another dynamic dimension of place – namely, the human encounter with the place. For Næss, place is about belonging. Belonging to a place, he argues, is traditionally understood as being tied to the location where one is born and raised; through this, a place becomes a Place – with a capital 'P'. Yet places can also be created. In this sense, place is developed by humans as a location where a person feels at home and cultivates a sense of belonging. Næss even uses the notion of establishing 'a place as a Place' (Næss 2010:46). Hence, place is not merely given; it is something we create and shape. In the human-nature encounter, a relationship to the location emerges, and this meeting can be characterised as creative and formative.

A distinctive feature of Næss's descriptions of place is its close interweaving with an understanding of the human-nature encounter, where the notion of home repeatedly appears. Whilst some of his accounts offer neutral descriptions of areas – and at times positive portrayals of places – he also emphasises reflections on environments that have changed negatively, particularly due to human influence. Places can be altered, degraded or even rendered uninhabitable by external causes, with the consequence that the original place of belonging is gone.

In our current context of environmental challenges, such loss of belonging to a place can lead to a loss of self, since belonging is integral to one's identity – what Næss calls the *ecological self*: 'Home was where one belonged. It was "part of oneself," that is, it delimited an ecological self, rich in internal relations to what is now called environment' (Næss 2005:339). The experience of loss of belonging to a place is not merely an inner sense of deprivation; it has an external, physical concreteness, as the geographical location with its distinctive character is altered or destroyed. Næss expresses this negative condition through notions such as the *place-corrosive process* and the feeling of *loss of place*. This sense of loss is deeply interwoven with longing for place, which Næss (2010) in turn relates to the fundamental human need for belonging:

But the loss of place I felt, the longing persists, and so we feel the need to articulate what it means to belong to a place. The movement towards the development of a sense of place is strengthened through a tightening of the interrelation between the self and the environment. (p. 45)

This sense of belonging leads us to consider the role Næss assigns to emotions in relation to place. For Næss, belonging, or the loss of belonging, is strongly connected to emotions. He speaks of *place feeling* and emphasises that humans develop strong emotional ties to certain places, which he also

describes as *bioregionalism*. These feelings can manifest both negatively and positively: negatively as the experience of loss of place and alienation, and positively as the feelings of belonging and being at home. In addition, we may speak of longing, positively, as the desire to return to the place where one belongs, but also as a longing for a home that has been lost due to environmental change.

Hence, nature as place is a locus of deeper insight where emotions play a vital role. For Næss, emotions are not merely surface phenomena – responses triggered by sense impressions of places. Rather, emotions carry a deeper significance, interwoven with his understanding of rationality. Emotions, for Næss, do not stand in opposition to reason, as if rationality were exclusively a matter of detached logic. Rationality should not be conceived as a 'dry' rationality. Instead, emotions grant access to a deeper rationality in which feelings and reason converge. At this point, Næss draws inspiration from Spinoza and his conception of *ratio* – a deeper rationality. For Spinoza, ratio is the inner voice of rationality (Næss 1999:44). This inner voice, according to Næss, functions as an inner authority, pointing towards the direction one should take to achieve the highest human goals. These goals, in short, are freedom and self-existing.

It is reasonable to interpret Næss that the deeper insight of ratio is ethical – or perhaps more precisely, that it carries an ethical direction from within and outwards (Sæther 2020:172–173). Ethical, in this sense, means that the orientation towards 'where to go' involves value-based choices, where humans make ethical judgements grounded in the 'fusion' of emotions and reason that constitutes ratio. This synthesis can guide humans towards wise and responsible decisions.

Yet, for Næss, ethical judgement does not end with deliberation; it also points forward towards action. Taken together, we can say that the context in which this occurs is precisely nature as place, where the human-nature encounter unfolds. Thus, in Næss, we find a line of thought in which the physical-geographical place awakens emotions that open access to a deeper rationality, setting a direction towards achieving the highest human goals.

Commitment to place: Insights from ecotheology

A parallel stream of thought to ecophilosophy is ecotheology. In what follows, I will highlight selected insights based on the work of the Norwegian ecotheologian Roald Kristiansen. He was amongst the first to address ecotheology as a topic in Norway and offers valuable perspectives on the significance of place within an ecotheological framework. Throughout the 2000s, Kristiansen emphasised that ecotheology should give greater attention to the importance of place, and particularly local perspectives.

The fact that early ecotheology did not explicitly address place does not mean the concept was absent; rather, it was

implicit, given that the entire ecotheological project is rooted in taking the environmental crisis seriously. For example, in one of the earliest and most influential works in ecotheology, Cobb's (1971) *Is It Too Late?*, the notion of place, or nature as place, is not explicitly discussed, yet it is clearly embedded in the themes explored. Cobb's primary concern was to highlight that Christianity must reckon with the ecological crisis. The more explicit focus on place in ecotheology during the early 2000s may well be related to the attention on the spatial turn, which likely might have been some of the contextual backdrop for some of Kristiansen's works.

In his elaboration of place, Kristiansen particularly emphasises the notion of *locality*, arguing for that we need to develop a consciousness and awareness of locality and its significance for human life (Kristiansen 2007:22). For Kristiansen, locality encompasses both belonging and relationships, with the former serving as a prerequisite for the latter. When we belong to a place, we can cultivate commitment and binding relationships with other humans and with the surrounding natural world. Thus, for Kristiansen, a commitment to nature as place and its ethical concern lies at the heart of ecotheology.

When we belong to a place, we create relational commitments to nature as place. Kristiansen is concrete: such commitments extend to fish, the sea, trees and mountains. In his view, humans and nature belong to one another in the closest possible binding relationship. Importantly, Kristiansen stresses that locality should not be understood in a way that excludes broader perspectives. He argues for a synthesis of local and global dimensions, expressed through the term *glocal*. This concept indicates that our commitment and love for place is not confined to a single local geographical setting but also involves a zooming out towards other geographical levels, such as regions and Earth itself.

Kristiansen understands ecotheology as cultivating a new holistic perspective in which belonging and binding relationships are essential components. This approach stands in continuity with his earlier ecotheological work, where he explores the theological concept of covenant within the Christian tradition (Kristiansen 1993:22). Covenant theology, in his interpretation, focuses on the obligations humans have towards their surroundings. Whilst I will not pursue his specific theological reflections here, I will highlight some points he develops from the ideas of belonging and commitment – most notably the concept of *topophilia*.

Kristiansen describes topophilia as a love for place, borrowing the term from cultural geography (Kristiansen 2007:22–23). A topophilia relationship to place, as he understands it, must be conceived broadly: humans develop connections to place historically, socially and culturally. Thus, for Kristiansen, place is more than a physical-geographical location; it also encompasses a mental dimension. However, this mental dimension is conditioned by the geographical one. Mental place arises when our identity is linked to the historical and cultural distinctiveness of a location. Moreover, topophilia

has a glocal character, indicating that our love for place extends beyond the immediate local environment to encompass regional and global dimensions.

Building on this, Kristiansen argues that such a broad understanding of place invites a rethinking of nature as a resource. Rather than speaking of nature as a resource in instrumental terms, he proposes a perspective of belonging – conceiving the human–nature relationship as one of friendship. This shift reshapes how humans relate to resources and underscores that ethical concern and commitment lie at the heart of his ecotheology.

Nature as place – Key topics for a grounded spirituality

Based on the preceding analyses of Næss and Kristiansen, I identify some key themes for understanding nature as place that are particularly relevant to the discourse on ecospirituality. These themes are closely interconnected and, in my view, form a chain of thought: the physical-geographical place; the intertwined relationship between humans and nature; emotional awareness of place, and, finally, the transformative potential of aesthetic experiences in nature.

Nature as a physical-geographical place

First and foremost, nature as place concerns the concrete, physical-geographical surroundings – a perspective clearly articulated by both Næss and Kristiansen. Yet nature as place is always perceived from a given context: my actual encounter. I meet nature – my surroundings – from a specific locality. Moreover, nature as place must be understood dynamically, both in the sense that nature's own development, the grand evolutionary story, is a dynamic process, and in the sense that humans act as shaping and creative agents. Nature as place is given, yet it can also be developed and created. In line with the spatial turn (cf. Lefebvre & Soja), this implies that the human–nature encounter is a space of lived experience. According to both Næss and Kristiansen, human experiences in nature construct their spaces. This opens for human imagination and creativity, suggesting that places are not only physical, but also mental constructs, notions that resonate with themes found in the spatial turn.

Place: Where humans and nature are intertwined

Building on the emphasis on nature as a physical-geographical place, it is equally important to underscore that humans are not detached from this place but are profoundly interwoven with it. For both Næss and Kristiansen, humans are nature – dependent on it and engaged in a complex interplay with it. This is a central theme, particularly in Næss's deep ecology. Both Næss and Kristiansen highlight a holistic-relational account of nature, and indeed of reality itself. Consequently, relationality is intrinsic to the very notion of the human–nature encounter. Whilst a detailed exploration of this relational dimension lies beyond the scope of this section,

possible approaches include concepts such as *atmosphere*, which offer avenues for further inquiry (Bergmann 2006).

Emotional awareness of place

Both Næss and Kristiansen emphasise that the human encounter with nature as place involves awareness. In this context, awareness refers to a deliberate attentiveness to one's surroundings – a conscious, directed focus on place. At its core, awareness is embodied and situated; it occurs in presence and is characterised by a here-and-now engagement with nature. This immediacy entails sensory perception and emotional responsiveness, which may include both positive and negative emotions (Clewis 2021). Consequently, it is reasonable to speak of emotional awareness.

The spatiality of awareness involves the full engagement of the senses – what we see, hear, taste, smell, and touch – creating a mode of presence in which the self is open and receptive. In addition, awareness is about staying aware over time (eds. Bergmann & Eaton 2011). Awareness over time may cultivate commitment (cf. Kristiansen). Hence, awareness is a quality, even a skill, where we, over time, are paying attention to and dwelling upon our surroundings. Furthermore, awareness of nature as place includes attentiveness to its positive qualities and mystery, as well as to negative, such as the place-corrosive processes (cf. Næss 2010). In other words, it involves noticing what we value and seek to protect, alongside what we strive to prevent from being lost.

This leads me to one form of emotional awareness: feeling at home in nature. Both Næss and Kristiansen touch upon this theme in their reflections on belonging. Feeling at home in nature can be understood both as a lived human experience and as a creative process through which humans make nature their home. Importantly, such experiences should not be reduced to mere sensory or emotional reactions; rather, they involve a reflective awareness of one's existence within specific surroundings (Bergmann 2006:336). This reflective awareness allows for the development of an emotional relationship with nature. Evidently, negative emotions may also arise in response to our environmental challenges. Albrecht (2019) has articulated this tension through the term *solastalgia*: defined as 'the homesickness you have when you are still located within your home environment' (Albrecht 2019:29). Instead of feeling at home, we experience distress caused by the gradual change, and loss, of a loved place (cf. Næss 2010). On the other hand, as the following section will show, feeling at home in nature can be enriched within the broader framework of aesthetic experiences in nature.

The transformative potential of aesthetic experiences in nature

Aesthetic experiences in nature are implicit in the reflections on nature as place found in both Næss and Kristiansen. It is uncontroversial to assert that human encounters with nature involve both positive and negative aesthetic experiences. In what follows, I emphasise the positive aspects. This is not an attempt to romanticise the beauty of

nature or nature experiences; rather, aesthetic experiences carry profound existential and spiritual significance. Within the human encounter with natural beauty, the sublime and the wonder that accompany these, there lies a transformative potential (De Cruz 2024; Løvoll & Sæther 2023). The strong connection between emotions and aesthetic experiences in nature has also been examined in empirical research (Løvoll, Sæther & Graves 2020). These studies indicate that environmental context plays a crucial role in shaping such experiences, reinforcing the idea that aesthetic engagement with nature is deeply situated and relational.

This brings me to the question of the potential for self-transcendence arising from the aesthetic encounter with nature. Both Næss and Kristiansen offer implicit insights into this possibility. What may emerge in the human-nature encounter is an increased awareness of oneself in space and time (cf. Kristiansen's notion of consciousness of locality). Such awareness enables deeper engagement with nature as place and is closely connected to the phenomenon of wonder and the related awe (De Cruz 2024). Wonder motivates humans to reflect and to seek deeper insight, and it is a shared human experience. According to Vasalou (ed. 2012), this flow of wonder is not merely intellectual; it also fosters ethical awareness and practical engagement. In this way, wonder becomes a bridge between aesthetic experience, spiritual reflection and ethical action.

Thus, aesthetic experience, wonder and awareness potentially converge into a common stream oriented towards transformation and ethical responsibility. As Bergmann and Eaton (eds. 2011:3) observe, awareness and openness influence 'the kind of questions we ask, how and what we reflect upon, and ultimately how we answer our queries'. Endured awareness can cultivate a contemplative attitude and foster the capacity for attentiveness and concern for action.

What deepens the exploration of these aesthetic experiences in nature is the recognition that aesthetic experiences are closely intertwined with ethics. In this context, Bergmann's notion of *aesth/ethics* is illuminating. Bergmann (2011) coined this term to underscore the inseparability of aesthetics and ethics. Similarly, the interweaving of aesthetics and ethics is emphasised within environmental aesthetics (Seel 1998). Our appreciation of nature – our love of place (cf. Kristiansen's *topophilia*) – and the sense that nature as place is our home are inherently value-laden. What we value, we are inclined to care for and protect. For Kristiansen, this is expressed through the notion of commitment; for Næss, it lies at the core of our ultimate goals (*ratio*).

Conclusion: Nature as place in ecospirituality

Based on the foregoing explorations, I conclude by shortly situating these reflections within the context of ecospirituality. I have outlined a possible trajectory that begins with the physical-geographical concreteness of nature as place. In this sense, nature as place functions as a

precondition for developing concern for nature – a concern that, in turn, becomes a precondition for care and ultimately for ethically motivated action towards the natural world.

I suggest that these perspectives on the notion of place can open a broader and more profound approach to ecospirituality. This aligns with my understanding of ecospirituality as an orientation or adapted perspective. As an orientation, ecospirituality seeks the most universal formulations of what it entails and what its aims might be – whilst remaining a grounded, earthly spirituality. An exploration of nature as place offers one such shared language for reflecting on our position on Earth and for cultivating ethical responsibility for our surrounding nature, considering the environmental challenges.

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