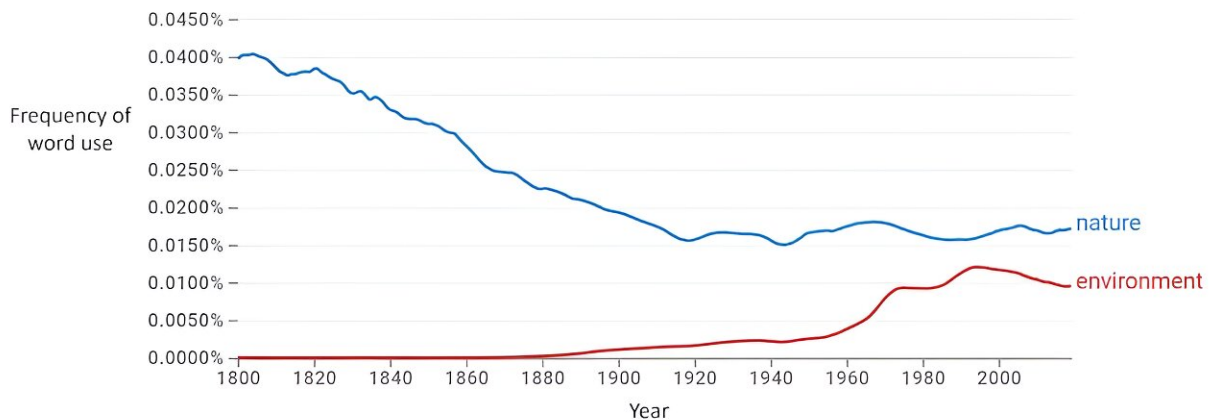


A new campaign wants to redefine the word 'nature' to include humans—here's why this linguistic argument matters

May 13 2024, by Tom Oliver



Analysis of word use frequency in literature from 1800 to present day. Credit: Figure sourced from Google Ngram, [CC BY-ND](#)

What does the word nature mean to you? Does it conjure visions of wild places away from the hustle and bustle of people, or does it include humans too? The meaning of nature has changed since the word was first used back as early as the [15th century](#).

Now a new campaign, [We Are Nature](#), aims to persuade dictionaries to include humans in their definitions of nature. This campaign, a collaboration between a group of lawyers and a design company, involves a petition and [open letter](#), as well as a collection of alternative definitions supplied by various thinkers and authors (including me). Here's my definition of nature:

"The living world comprised as the total set of organisms and relationships between them. These organisms include bacteria, fungi, plants and animals (including humans). Some definitions may also include non-living entities as part of nature—such as mountains, waterfalls and cloud formations—in recognition of their important role underpinning the web of life."

Derived from the Latin "natura," literally meaning "birth," nature used to only refer to the innate qualities or essential disposition of something. But over time, it also began to describe something "other" or separate to humans. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) [defines nature as](#):

"The phenomena of the physical world collectively, esp. plants, animals and other features and products of the Earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations."

But how did we arrive at such a definition, which hinges on us being apart from, rather than a part of, the natural world? Since the 17th century, a rationalist world view prompted by philosophers such as René Descartes increasingly saw things from a mechanical perspective, comparing the workings of the universe to a great machine. Rather than any kind of divine spirit inhabiting the natural world, this perspective emphasized the split between the human mind and physical matter.

Anything non-human fell into the latter category and was likened to

clockwork machinery. But that view has since been found to lead to [animal cruelty](#), and many environmental bodies including the [European Environment Agency](#) suggest this disconnect is accelerating the decline of nature.

Is it OK to change words in a dictionary through lobbying? There are two lines of thought here. One might argue yes, if the [scientific evidence](#) suggests the distinction between nature and humans is illusory—something I [have argued](#) based on findings in biology, ecology and neuroscience.

A dictionary definition represents society's framing of the natural world. This in turn influences our perception of our place within it—and the actions we take to protect nature. So, the words we use have real-world impacts: they frame how we think and determine how we feel and act. Linguist [George Lakoff](#) has argued that they ultimately structure our society.

My children are growing up in a world where humans feel disconnected with nature—indeed, the UK ranks among the [most disconnected](#) countries. Research shows this leads people to make [fewer positive environmental changes to their behavior](#), such as reducing their carbon footprint, recycling, or doing voluntary conservation work.

Conversely, when people feel they are enmeshed with nature, they are not only greener in their behavior but they tend to be [happier](#). So I absolutely want my kids to grow up feeling they are part of nature.

There are some words that I certainly recommend we use less. I dislike the term "natural capital," referring to nature as an asset that can be commodified and sold. These words have a place with professional environmentalists and policy, but they can also create [psychological distancing](#) and make us care less for natural world.

One sustainability-focused communications agency found the best way to motivate people about protecting nature is through messages based on [awe and wonder](#), rather than the economic value of nature. [Scientific studies](#) back this up.

Dangers of controlling language

But I'm torn. Another line of thought suggests it's not OK to change the meaning of words through lobbying, and that dictionaries should reflect how words are being used—the OED [takes this position](#).

Dystopian fiction, including George Orwell's "[Nineteen Eighty-Four](#)," highlights the dangers of a world where controlling the language allows control of the population. Dictionaries bowing to pressure from lobbying seems to set a dangerous precedent.

With regards to the meaning of nature, if a word is too broad, it may lose its usefulness in communication, just like a blunt knife is a poor tool for carving food. People wanting to articulate the natural world may simply use other words, such as "environment." This word is derived from the French *environs*, explicitly describing something surrounding us.

Environment has already been replacing nature in our modern lexicon. This may reflect a subtle cognitive shift towards increasingly seeing human beings as distinct entities, separate from the natural world.

Nature v environment: tracking the use of these words

But the We Are Nature campaign is not just lobbying the OED based on a preferred use of language. The organizers have collated many [historical uses of the word](#) nature from 1850 to the present day, some of which

include humans in the meaning, and presented the dictionary with this evidence. In April 2024, as a result, the OED removed the label "obsolete" from a secondary, wider definition of nature comprising "the whole natural world, including human beings."

But to change the primary definition of nature from "as opposed to humans" to "including humans" will require more people to use the word in a way that reflects how humans are intertwined with the whole web of life.

The great thing is, by doing this, we rekindle the bonds of care towards the living world around us. And by dispelling the illusion of our separation from nature, we can also expect to live [happier lives](#). Words matter—there is restoration and joy from talking about how we are nature.

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