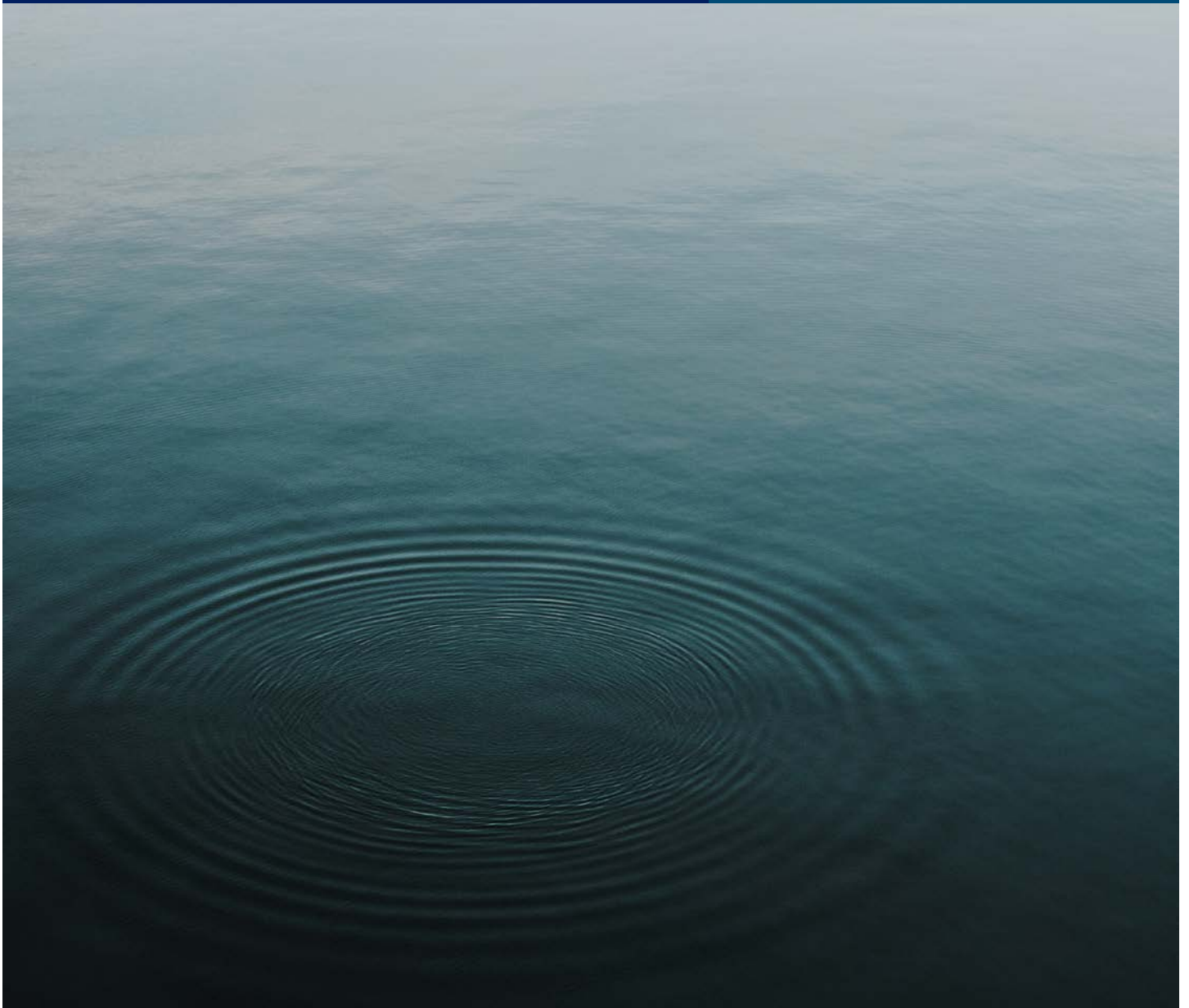


Contemplative nature engagement practices to support individuals and communities facing ecological distress

School of
Agriculture,
Food and
Ecosystem
Sciences



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE



Acknowledgement of Country

This work was largely created on Wurundjeri Country. We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Wurundjeri people as the Traditional Owners of these lands and recognise their unceded continuing and evolving connections to Country. We also acknowledge the First Nations peoples of the different lands across Australia where all co-authors live and work, from Whadjuk Country in the West, to Gadigal lands in the East.

We acknowledge the ancient and contemporary practices in which First Nations peoples listen to and care for Country; practices that have sustained and nourished Earth and peoples for millennia.

We are immensely grateful for the opportunity to love, honour, and connect with Country, and to feel the love and care from Country that supports us and the work that we do.

Preface

Authors

Researchers:

Rose Macaulay, Katherine Johnson, Cullan Joyce, Dianne Vella-Brodrick, Iain Walker, Kathryn Williams

Practitioners:

Sara Jones, Anne Lanyon, Belinda McCawley, Sue Martin, Mari Rhydwen, Christina Rowntree, Jem Stone, Jamie Thomas, Maya Ward

This work is supported by the Contemplative Studies Centre at the University of Melbourne as part of their Seed Funding Program. **We thank Alana Marsh and interview participants for their helpful contributions to this project.**

Please cite this document as:

Macaulay, R., Joyce, C., Jones, S., Johnson, K., Lanyon, A., McCawley, B., Martin, S., Rhydwen, M., Rowntree, C., Stone, J., Thomas, J. M., Vella-Brodrick, D., Walker, I., Ward, M., and Williams, K. (2023). *Contemplative nature engagement practices to support individuals and communities facing ecological distress*. School of Agriculture, Food and Ecosystem Sciences, The University of Melbourne.



This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0



Contents

Introduction	4
Adaptive responses to ecological change	5
Approach	6
Layers of change	6
Principles for preparing and implementing contemplative nature engagement practices	9
Activities	11
Formal meditation	12
Attention to nature through the senses	15
Movement through	16
Visualisation and imagination	19
Sharing with others	20
Appendix	24
Author statements	24
References	27

1. Introduction

Climate and ecological change threaten planetary, individual, and community health and wellbeing. Widespread damages to ecosystems and people have already occurred, and many projected future impacts are unavoidable¹.

The impacts of ecological change are widely felt. In Australia, up to 80% of people have experienced the direct effects of extreme weather events since 2019, and over half (51%) of these individuals report that their mental health has been impacted².

Eco-distress is an important consequence of these crises.

Eco-distress refers to psychological and emotional responses related to present or future ecological change^{3,4}. It includes a range of emotions such as fear, frustration, anger, guilt, grief, and anxiety⁴; it can also include hope, care, inspiration and motivation toward pro-environmental behaviour⁵.

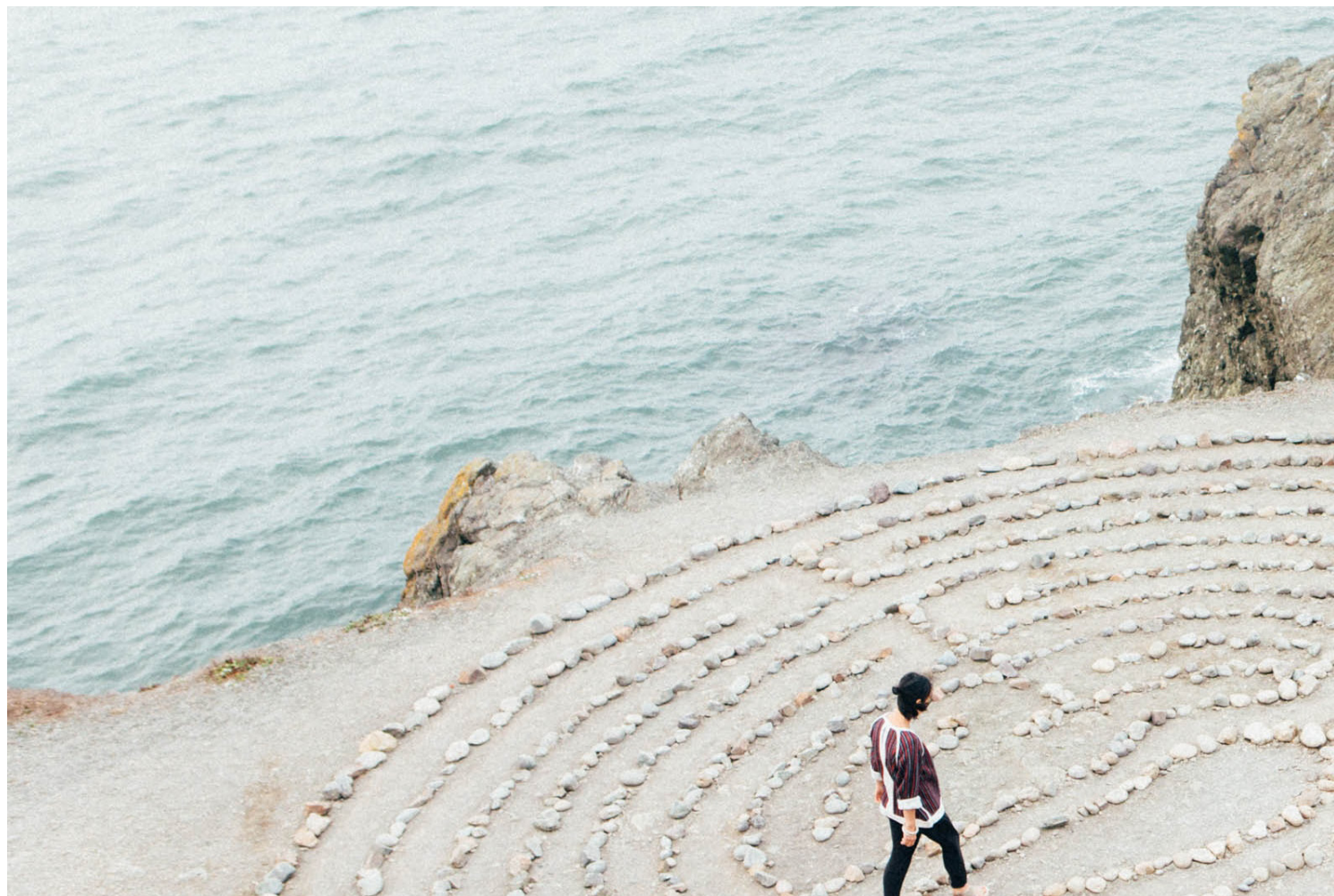
Eco-distress is typically a healthy and appropriate response to local and global ecological crises⁵. As put by UK researchers, “A degree of emotional disturbance may be an important precursor to realigning our actions to a moral code that has been violated.”⁵

But in some cases, **eco-distress can become overwhelming** and diminish one’s sense of wellbeing and the likelihood of collective action for the environment. Many individuals and communities need support to face eco-distress in meaningful and healthy ways.

Contemplative nature engagement practices can play a role in addressing ecological distress. These practices integrate meditation and reflection with sensory and imaginative engagement with nature in ways that promote positive outcomes for individual people, communities, and the natural world.

As academics and teachers and leaders of diverse contemplative practices, we believe contemplative nature engagement practices have much to offer for **creating healthier relationships with self, others, and nature.**

This document provides guidance on designing contemplative nature-engagement practices to encourage more adaptive responses to ecological change.



2. Adaptive responses to ecological change

Research highlights three dimensions of adaptive responses to ecological change:

- Healthier relationship with **self**, including understanding and working with emotions.
- Healthier relationship with other **people**, so that we can act with and for the benefit of other people.
- Healthier relationship with **nature**, acting with and for and *as* nature (see Box: What do we mean by “nature”).
- These dimensions are integrated and form a holistic way of adaptively responding to ecological change.

At the level of the individual person, adaptive responses may take different forms. For some people experiencing eco-distress, adaptive responses to ecological change may primarily involve reducing acute feelings of distress. For others, adaptive responses may comprise acknowledging and embracing emotional responses and feeling empowered to act for the environment. For yet others, an adaptive response may require rediscovering a deeper relationship with and responsibility to nature.

What do we mean by “nature”?

We recognise and embrace the diverse perspectives of *nature*, and the varied language that individuals, groups, cultures, and traditions use to convey meaning and relationship with the natural world. Through this document we use the term “nature”, but we encourage readers to consider terms that resonate with their own context.

While nature is commonly used to refer to non-human or non-manmade elements and processes, practitioners in this space observe the *oneness* between people and nature.

We collectively recognise that there is no real distinction between humans and nature.

Nature extends from the soils and stones beneath our feet, to the microbes in and around our bodies, to the trees and animals in our living world, to the stars and matter beyond Earth’s atmosphere.



3. Approach

This guidance is developed by:

- academics from environmental, developmental, and positive psychology, as well as philosophy and divinity.
- teachers and leaders of contemplative practices from diverse traditions including First Nation, Buddhist, Christian spiritualities, eco-feminist and secular mindfulness and forest therapy approaches.

See appendix 7.1 for more details.

In developing this guidance, we sought to bridge scientific theory and evidence and wisdom of contemplative traditions and practices. This occurred through a co-design process involving literature review, interviews, and workshops.

This guidance is aimed at group leaders and teachers working with people experiencing eco-distress. The guidance may be particularly

relevant for community leaders of eco-activist groups, practitioners who lead or facilitate contemplative and nature-based practices, therapists, faith leaders, or individuals seeking further resources to support their own practice, and build better relationships with self, others, and nature.

In this document, we provide high-level advice that can be adapted to fit specific cases or contexts. The guidance is written with healthy adults experiencing eco-distress in mind. It may not be appropriate for use with individuals or groups experiencing acute levels of psychological distress.

While all authors live and work in Australia, we hope this resource is useful to practitioners and researchers everywhere, across practices, disciplines, worldviews, and traditions.

4. Layers of change

What are contemplative nature engagement practices?

Contemplative nature engagement practices integrate reflection and introspection with embodied or sensory experiences of nature or natural systems.

For many people, these experiences are transformative. They may reveal a world that is far more creative, alive, intelligent, beautiful and suffused with love than previously known. They may evoke a sense of interconnectedness with nature or of being a small part of a greater living system.

Contemplative nature engagement practices aim to ground and enculturate these insights; by feeling the support of both human community and nature herself, participants are strengthened to act in service of all life.

How do contemplative nature engagement practices support adaptive responses to ecological change?

We recognise five interrelated layers of experience through which contemplative nature engagement practices can support healthier relationships with self, others, and nature (Figure 1).

Layer 1: Grounding and attention to the present moment

Focusing attention on sensory and body experiences can create a deeper presence in the here and now. For some people, this provides respite from urgent focus on future and action. Non-judgmental attention to the present moment can foster openness and curiosity towards our experience and the world around us⁶.

Layer 2: Reduced stress; greater joy; and restoration

Building on this grounding and present moment awareness, contemplative nature practices can evoke a sense of calm, alertness and a reduction in stress. Feeling restored in mind and body leads to stronger capacity to face the practice with openness and clarity. These experiences may involve positive emotional responses such as joy, gratitude, and love – for self, others, and nature.⁷



Figure 1: The layers of experience through which contemplative nature engagement practices support better relationships with self, others, and nature. We use imagery of a fern, growing and transforming and expanding. The unfurling fronds of the fern represent cycles of transformation through practices, and layering of insight and experience. The repeating and connecting patterns that occur on fern fronds and leaves illustrate patterns of emergence that occur at multiple scales – this might be at individual or collective scales, or it may be over different time scales, where some practices unfold over a lifetime, while others occur over shorter transformative experiences.

Layer 3: Connectedness, self-transcendence, kinship

Experiences of openness, love and joy are often marked by shifts in self-boundaries. Interpretation of these shifts varies across cultures, traditions, and contexts. Some people may experience transcendence beyond the limits of everyday life to something greater, more true, real or beautiful. Some people may feel a sense of connection or interconnectedness with other people, with the natural world, or with the Divine^{8,9}. In many traditions, this connection is experienced as one of kinship, including loving and being loved by the wider family of all life.

Layer 4: Insights to relationships with self, others, nature

Shifts in perspective associated with experiences of kinship with the living world and transcending beyond self-boundaries can lead to new and profound insights into one's relationship with self, with other people, and with the natural world. Sensing one's embeddedness in a greater living system can encourage reflection on how to act, think and feel in response to new understanding. For example, a deep connection and belonging with Earth may foster a renewed purpose and responsibility for as well as appreciation that one does not act alone.

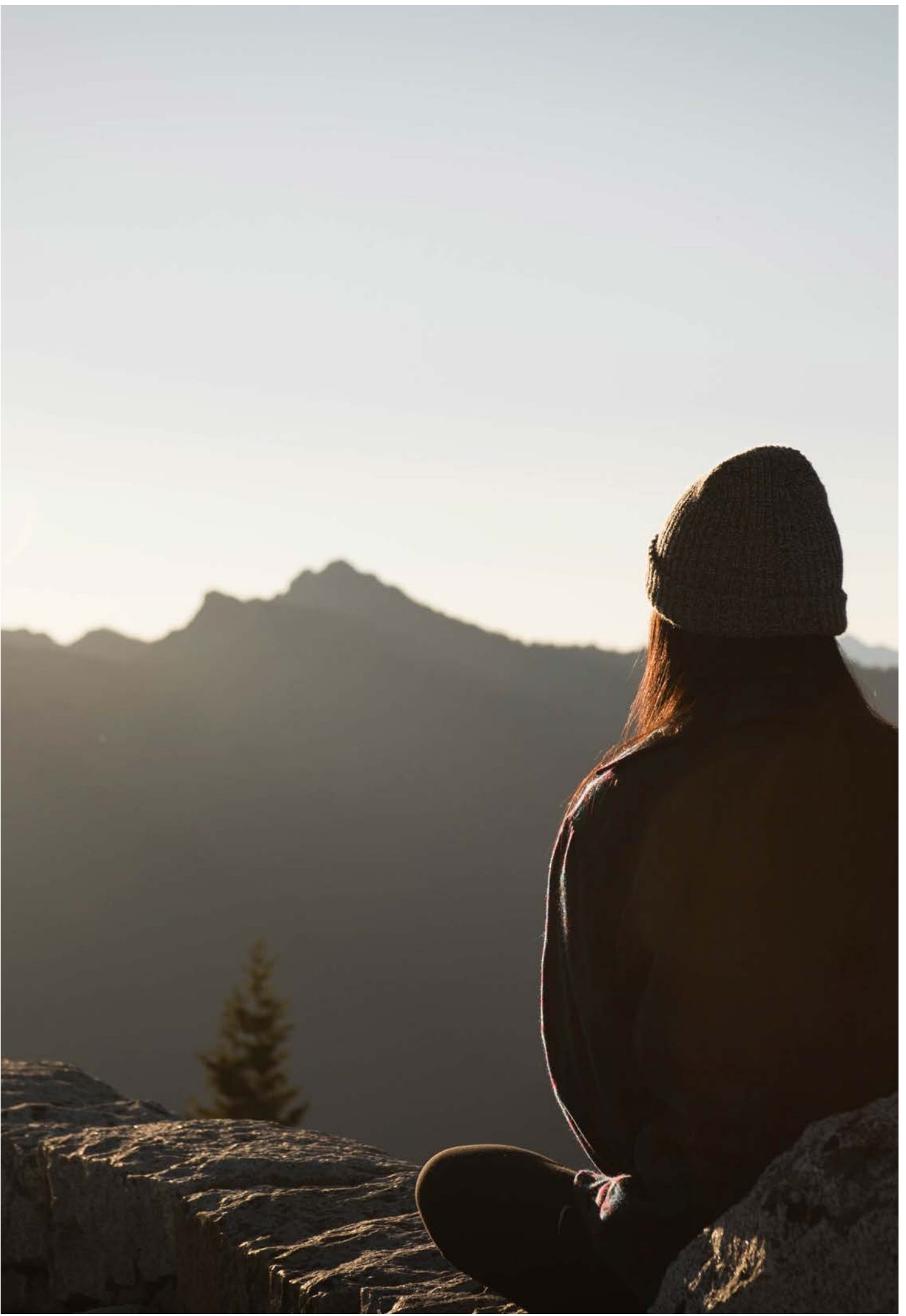
Layer 5: Shared understandings and integration

Bringing insights to consciousness and sharing these with others are vital for integrating new perspectives and understandings into everyday life. This can happen through story-telling and sense-making, establishing new individual or collective intentions, or establishing social conditions for taking action (for example through shifting norms, sharing resources and collective action).

These layers of experience are interconnected and cannot be disentangled into discrete steps that one follows through a practice. However, we do propose that there may be an integrated broadening and building¹⁰, from grounding and restoration through to transcendence and insight.

This experiential layering occurs over time, with growth and transformation supported by shorter practice sessions as well as lifelong practices that unfurl over many years.

The general layers we have described are deeply embedded in cultures and social systems. The ways these layers are experienced will depend on worldviews and collective interpretation.



5. Principles for preparing and implementing contemplative nature engagement practices

1. Understand participant needs

A first step for preparing contemplative nature engagement practices is understanding the participant context and needs. Consider the culture and worldviews of participants and the practice, individual psychological wellbeing (including level of eco-distress), needs and capacity for practice and regulation, and prior experience with the practice or alternative practices. Practices should be designed and implemented in ways to meet participants where they are.

3. Establish a safe social space

It is critical to establish a supportive social setting that respects individual and cultural safety. There are multiple ways to achieve this. Participants should have the choice to take part in all aspects of the practice: activities should be non-prescriptive, using invitations rather than instructions. Encourage storytelling between participants during sharing time and use circles rather than hierarchical arrangements. Where there are more sensitive group dynamics, group agreements can be established prior to practice.

2. Curate a restorative physical setting

The environment that the practice is situated within will naturally shape the practice and pathways of growth. It should be safe, accessible and resonate with the activity and audience. It is helpful for the environment to provide a sense of distance from everyday life as well as gentle interest and enjoyment. The environment should provide opportunities for sensory or imagined engagement with nature, and interactions enriched with reciprocity, honour, and reverence of place.

4. Foster a sacred moment

Frame the experience and activity in a way that fosters expectation and seeking of growth, insight, and transformation. Simple actions like lighting a candle or holding silence can help participants be receptive to the layers of experience and outcomes of the practice design. These framings and expectations should resonate and be consistent with the other principles – they must consider participant needs, the environment, and the social setting.





6. Activities

In this section we outline five groups of activities that could be used (together or in isolation) to support individuals experiencing eco-distress. These activities have been identified through research and discussion with experts across a range of traditions, and we have grouped activities based on similar practice features or intentions.

Activities can be applied in a diversity of ways. We encourage adaption of activities to specific contexts, practices, and cultural traditions that suit the audience or individual. Deciding how to apply these activities for different groups should be a reflexive, intentional, and embedded process that considers the (cultural, religious, spiritual) context that the practice is situated within.

Practices containing these activities should be designed in a way that enables the three dimensions of growth – that is, activities can be combined to holistically support change in relationship with self, others and nature. This means that they should be designed to engage the five layers of experience, working from grounding in the present moment, through restoration and connection, to shared insights and enculturation.

We encourage practitioners to consider whether and how the practice changes over time to accommodate experience, growth and commitment of participants (i.e., over months, years, or lifelong practices). This guidance is intended to apply to the full range of practices in terms of duration and commitment over time.

6.1. Formal meditation

Formal meditation involves regulation of emotions or attention while sitting, walking or moving. In each case, the meditation itself is the focus of the activity. Meditation activities can involve explicit representations of “nature”, for example, focusing attention on plants or memories of favourite places. Even without this explicit representation, meditation can cut across typically perceived boundaries of self and nature. For example, attending to breathing can involve a flow of attention between surrounding air and body.

How to apply formal meditation in contemplative nature engagement practices

Invite participants to pay attention to breath, or thoughts, or body, or direct attention to other beings (e.g., to other people in loving kindness meditation, or attention to elements).

Consider inviting attention to:

- The nature around, including sounds and smells of other living beings or places.
- The nature within, including body, breath and memories of place.
- A repeated mantra, perhaps one that evokes a connection to the rest of nature.

It is important to invite participants to attend to thoughts and emotions without judgment or analysis. Encourage open awareness or monitoring of experiences, noticing these as they arise, but letting them pass. This may be particularly useful in settings that evoke more negative emotions or thoughts.

Using formal meditation with other activities to extend outcomes:

- Formal meditation can be used as a grounding activity to begin other practice, to settle and find clarity.
- Prompt sensory attention to nature as a source of support and care, for example focusing attention on the shade provided by a tree or the warmth of the sun. This focus can also foster a sense of interconnectedness and kinship with the wider living world.
- Invite sharing and reflection at the end of the practice – or at points throughout the meditation experience – to create shared and social experience, and to enculturate individual and collective insights.

Why might formal meditation help address eco-distress?

A critical role of formal meditation is **grounding and attention to the present moment**. Repeated meditation trains attention control so that participants are better able to maintain focus on the present. Meditation typically uses sensory engagement to evoke presence and can enhance body awareness through attention to physical sensations. Attention to one’s environment encourages openness and receptivity to the environment and Earth.

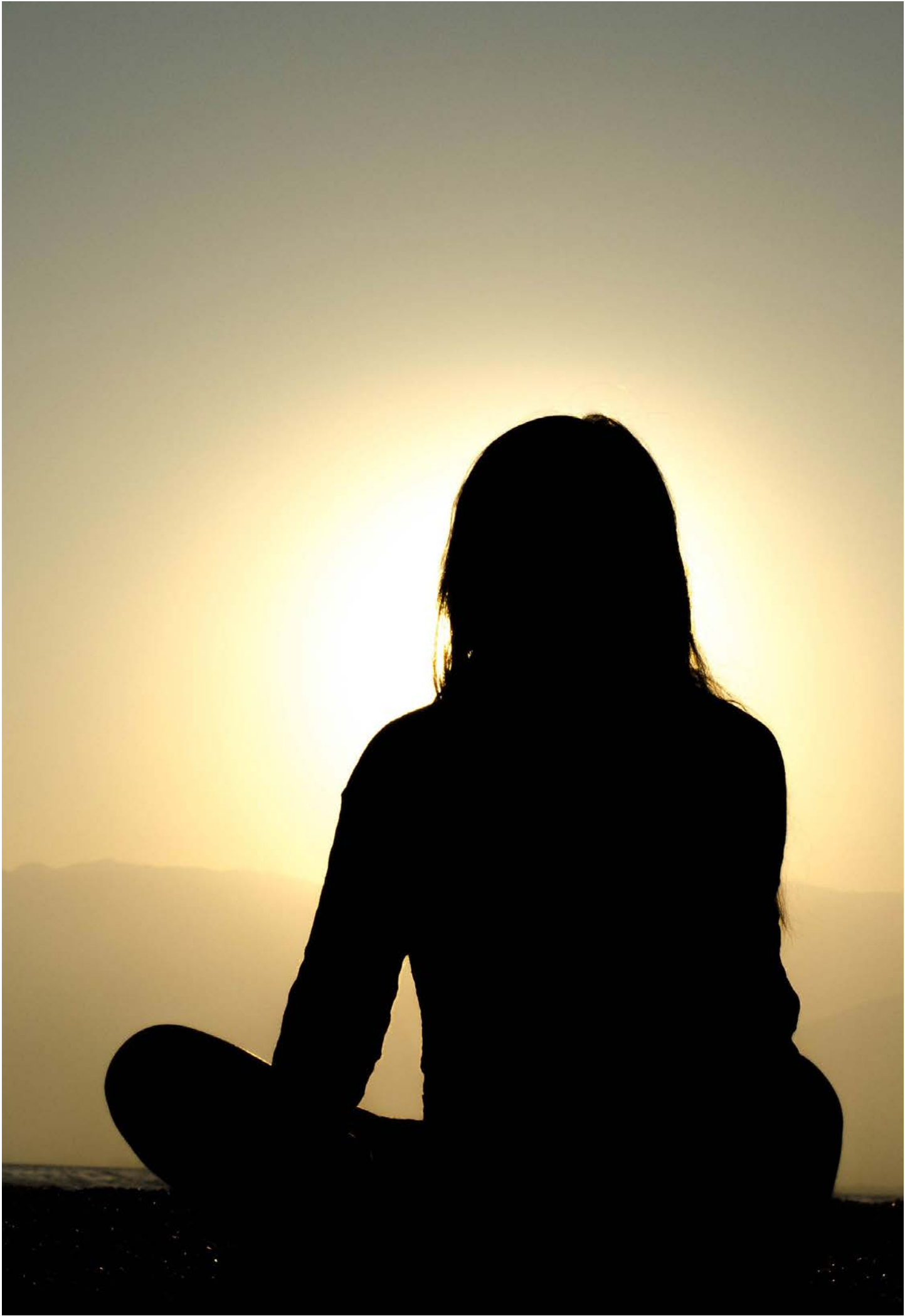
Formal meditation can also **reduce stress** and allow **restoration** by drawing attention away from distressing thoughts or urgent future-oriented action. Further, non-reactivity and nonjudgment of thoughts and emotions may give relief from acute sense of distress.

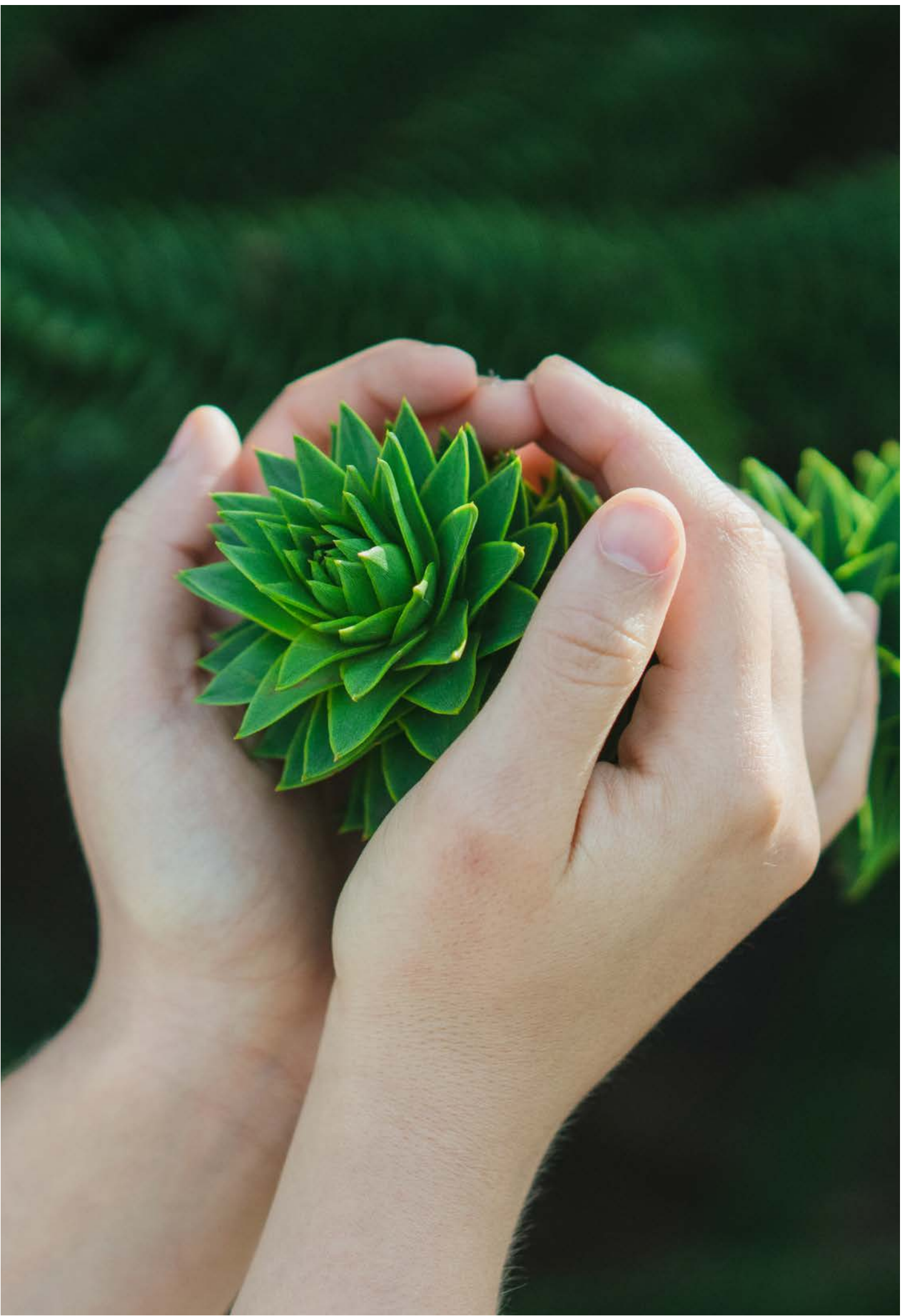
Formal meditation promotes openness to the rest of the world and can therefore lead to **connection and self-transcendence**. Over time, meditation can lead to a dissolution of self-boundaries (or sense that there is a self), and a heightened sense of connectedness with other beings. These experiences can generate great **insights to relationships** with self, others, and nature, and can be reinforced through non-analytical attention to the true nature of the Self.

Example practice

Maya Ward’s co-becoming process is a contemporary iteration of a timeless practice of using meditation to drop into a state of deep listening in which the boundaries between self and the more-than-human world transform into a lively co-creative communing. It is a response from a settler person seeking to find culturally respectful ways of acknowledging and integrating ancient Australian practices, with respect and permission. Thus, she refers to it as co-becoming, after the definition given by the Gay’wu group of women from Arnhem Land: “Country is the way humans and non-humans co-become, the way we emerge together and will always emerge together.”

The co-becoming process begins with a guided somatic meditation practice that heightens awareness of unconscious bodily processes such as breath and pulse and invites deep attention to the subtle and sensual perception always taking place between body and world. From this meditative, embodied state participants are guided to visualise and be mindfully present with aspects of life that may have very different ways of knowing or being. For example, Maya may invite participants to hold and smell a strawberry, to feel how the strawberry longs to be consumed and transformed so its seeds go through the body and reproduce, to feel the sense of chewing it, the felt sense of the strawberry in the body, in the stomach, and then the felt sense of the longing of bacteria in the gut to return to the earth. Maya then invites participants into stream-of-consciousness writing, for example inviting an aspect of nature with whom they have connected (e.g., strawberry or bacteria) to use their pen to express itself. The process ends with a sharing of the words given as gifts to nourish both the human and more-than-human participants.





6.2. Attention to nature through the senses

Attention to nature through the senses is a practice that involves embracing physical and sensory connectedness with the surrounding natural environment. These activities can be meditative – for example, attending to natural sounds during meditation – but this activity group also includes wider set of activities that involve exploring an environment through the full range and depth of sensory experience.

How to apply attention to nature in contemplative nature engagement practices?

Invite participants to engage and explore the full range of sensory experience of natural objects or places, using touch, smell, sight, hearing, taste and sense of position and movement. For example, invite participants to:

- Take their shoes off, lie on the ground, touch different textures in the environment.
- Map sounds (e.g. bird calls) in a place using numbers, words or pictures.
- Attend to nature with whole body, using body awareness as an ‘inner compass’ to guide exploration in the space.

Encourage curiosity and explorative openness, as well as activities that encourage more passive and receptive openness. For example:

- Use prompts that activate deep listening, where one learns from nature. For example, invite participants to spend extended time sitting and noticing the world around, waiting patiently and with curiosity.
- Use creative activities such as drawing or journaling to engage the senses and deepen curiosity.

Using attention to nature through the senses with other activities to extend outcomes:

- Consider a meditation activity to begin the activity and focus attention to present sensory experience.
- Invite participants move through the space in ways that promote varied sensory perspectives. For example, while walking provide prompts to attend first to sounds, then smells, then touch.
- Use prompts to orient participants to the wisdom and intelligence of animals and plant and ecosystems.

Why might attention to nature through the senses help address eco-distress?

Attending to nature through the senses is an effective way to **ground in the present moment**, by using the senses as an anchor to one’s present experience. Research suggests nature both gently engages and supports attention training.

Layering of more open, receptive sensory awareness (such as allowing attention to be drawn to different sounds as they appear) with more active curiosity and sensory exploration of an environment (such as seeking out diverse sensory experiences in a place) allows experience of closeness with an environment and so builds **connectedness** between the body, mind and earth.

Gentle awareness of the environment through the senses can support **restoration** and regulation and **motivate positive emotions** like joy and gratitude through aesthetic appreciation, love for and from nature, and the joy of curiosity and discovery.

Discovery through sensory awareness and exploration can also lead to novel experiences, new perspectives, and **insights** into one’s relationship with nature.

Example practice

Belinda McCawley teaches mindfulness in nature practices that use a variety of sensory-based exercises to orient people to the rest of the natural world.

One activity often used in the practice of nature journaling is the “Sound Mapping” exercise. Participants are invited to find a quiet and comfortable spot in the natural setting. Here, they are encouraged to “sit and be with nature,” allowing themselves to be fully witnessed by the natural world.

Each participant begins by placing a cross at the centre of a blank page in their journal, symbolising their current location. They are then prompted to close their eyes and listen to the sounds around them. As they hear each sound, they mark its relative location on the page. The closer the sound is to their position, the closer they depict it on their map. The exercise includes sounds of the modern world, such as cars, acknowledging them as part of the surrounding environment and promoting a holistic and inclusive experience.

The facilitator may offer prompts such as suggesting that participants “make their ears bigger” to pick up on different or subtle sounds. They can also encourage participants to notice if the sounds change over time. Participants are invited to use their own interpretations to create their sound maps. Some may choose to use colours as representations of sound; others might opt for using pictures, words, or even numbers to describe the sounds they hear.

This practice serves as a gateway to a deeper connection to the natural world and an increased appreciation for the subtle symphony of sounds that surround us.

6.3. Movement through

Practices that involve **movement through** are those where one moves through landscapes or settings in ways that represent a journey or process of discovery and transformation. The practices can involve reflection or contemplation on something, such as a problem or question, a passage, a poem; this reflection encourages insight and deeper experience through the journey. Such practices include labyrinth walking and pilgrimage.

How to apply movement through in contemplative nature engagement practices

The activity will typically follow a path that is determined by the facilitator to allow for:

- Reflection, contemplation, and insight: The path should foster opportunities to physically change perspective. For example, labyrinths use a cyclical meandering route that can embody dynamic and changing thought.
- Accessibility and ease: The path should not be a maze or challenging route. Reduce the effort required for wayfinding to allow space for contemplation and mind wandering.
- Pace and rhythm: Guiding people to walk the path should allow for individual needs, mobility and purpose, encouraging people to walk at their natural pace.
- Building connections with nature: The path should enable movement through or within landscapes in ways that connect participants with the wider environment or scenery. For example, following a river from its head to the sea.

These activities can be practiced at different temporal and spatial scales. For instance, the practice may be a single session moving through a small space, or a multi-day journey that traverses larger landscapes.

The restorative environment is important to offer support, safety, and care for inner reflections and insights.

Moving through can be practiced as an individual or collective journey.

Using movement through with other practices to extend outcomes:

- Encourage awareness of inner and outer landscapes: invite participants to notice physical sensations and internal experiences during the practice. For example, notice the physical sensations of the rain, and notice what is happening within you when you walk in the rain.

Why might movement through help address eco-distress?

Movement through landscapes evokes **grounding and attention to present moment** via connection and awareness of body and environment. Mindful and intentional walking builds connection to the body and presence of physical sense. Being in deeper connection to the body as one moves through a landscape heightens receptivity to the environment and present experience.

Moving at a slow and rhythmic pace, coupled with the presence in environment evokes a **stress-reduction and restorative response**. Attending to the rhythmic movement with body and mind helps one to regulate emotional responses – and co-regulation can occur through collective rhythmic movement.

This practice builds **connections with earth**, through embodied understanding and relationship with the landscape as one moves through it. In this way, **self-transcendence** can occur as one journeys in relationship with the earth.

Experiencing **insight** into one's relationship with self, others, and nature can occur via multiple paths.

- If one is reflecting on problem or passage, new understandings can form on the basis of that reflection and contemplation.
- Pilgrimage trance-like walking state can lead to insights, including through non-analytic mind wandering.
- As one moves through landscape, (visual) perspectives are constantly changing and activate dynamic thought, ideas, and insights.

Example practice

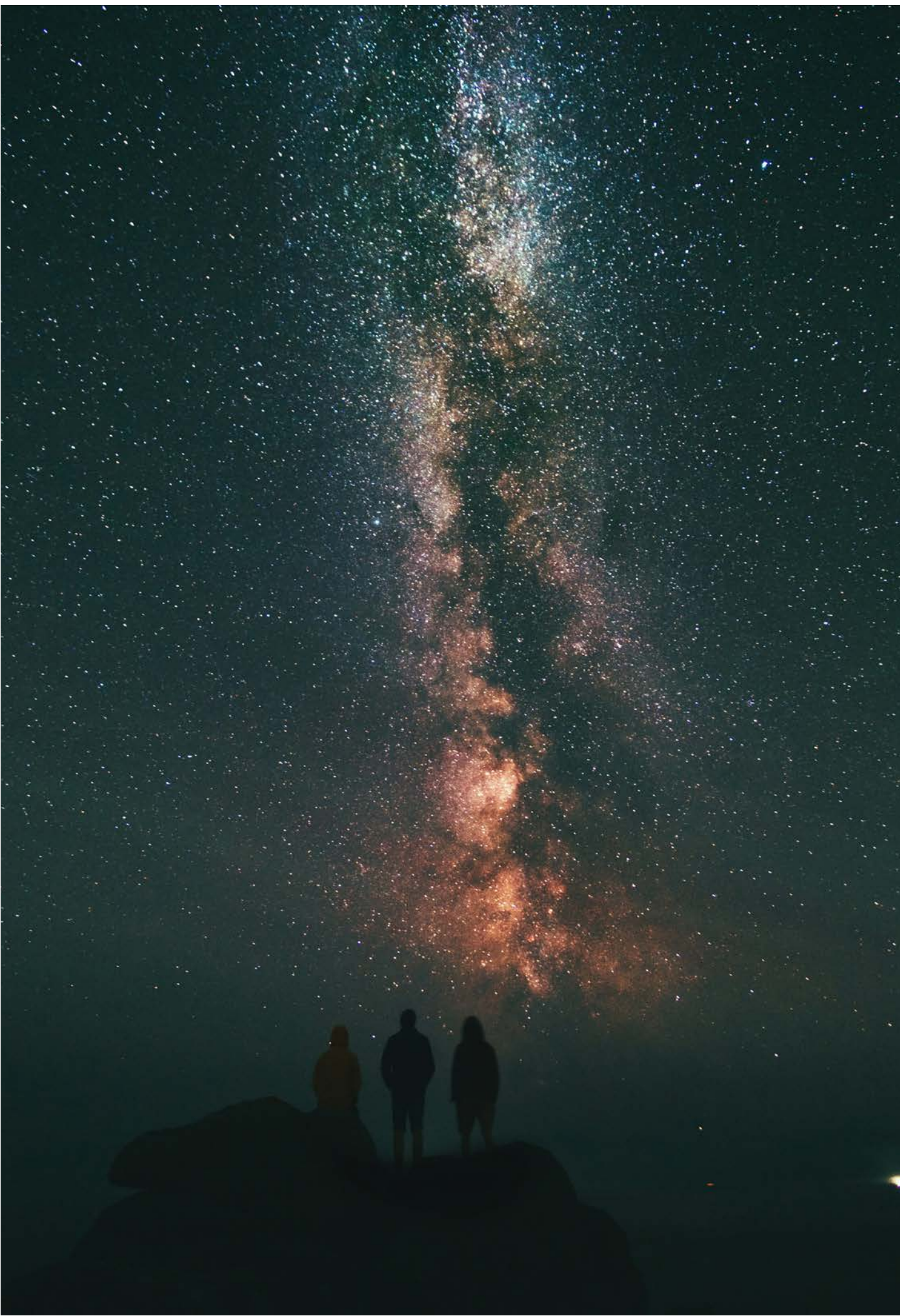
Christina Rowntree facilitates labyrinth walks. Christina often facilitates group walks at outdoor labyrinths that are made and permanent in the landscape.

A labyrinth may be formed as a permanent or ephemeral installation: for instance, marked out with a stick in sand on the beach, paved in stone in the landscape, or mown into grass. There is one path into the centre and usually walkers return on the same path out. Each labyrinth design conducts energy and so individuals may experience the walk differently as they are invited to walk with their own thoughts, stories, memories and history, allowing the experiences of the walk to speak as metaphors for their life journey.

A purposeful walk may be initiated with a personal question or dilemma, or as a way to be present to the landscape, to a sense of place. When facilitating a group walk, Christina invites people to walk at their own pace, and just for themselves. Walking alone, but together, is a remarkable and fairly unusual experience in modern culture.

It is helpful to know there's no right or wrong way to walk a labyrinth. Christina guides people to focus on releasing and letting go of any sense of burden, expectation, or judgement as they walk the inward path. Then to stop in the centre for as long as feels good, to receive there - receive an insight, a discovery - and to be present and mindful in that stillness. When ready, the walker retraces their steps along the same path. It can be felt as a return to the world, carrying insights from the centre stillness back into everyday life.





6.4. Visualisation and imagination

Visualisation and imagination in contemplative nature engagement are practices that bring to mind landscapes, elements, other beings, or memories with nature. This contemplative practice may be coupled with physical movements that embody and bring to life the landscape or being that is being visualised or imagined. The practice may be guided through narrative storytelling or set of instructions that evoke characteristics of the landscape or being.

How to apply visualisation and imagination in contemplative nature engagement practices?

Use a narration or prompts to guide participants to visualise specific landscapes or elements of nature and strengthen the felt sense of interconnectedness. For example, consider:

- Inviting participants to visualise familiar landscapes, using prompts to bring the sights, smells, sounds and textures to mind. Connecting with special places helps people to drop from their head space into their heart space.
- Inviting participants to visualise an unfamiliar landscape. It may be important to use richer visual cues and diverse sensory prompts to evoke a full and vivid experience.
- Inviting participants to visualise the movement of breath, imagining shared breath with trees or other beings.
- Inviting participants to feel the shared connection of energy flowing or vibrating among all things, seen and unseen. For example, some traditions invite sensing connection with Ancestors through time and place.

The activity can be coupled with actual or imagined physical movements that represent the beings that are brought into imagination. For example, invite participants to imagine a tree, extending arms to feel sense of branches, wriggling fingers to imagine leaves, and to imagine their feet as sturdy roots extending deep below them into the earth.

Consider using props or objects to activate memories and richness of imagination. For example, a bowl of sand may stimulate sensory memories of a coastal landscape.

Use visualisation and imagination with other activities to extend outcomes:

- Encourage activation of sensory experience during the visualisation – imagining the sights, smells, sounds, touch of the landscape or being that is brought into imagination.
- Often visualisations begin or are supported by guided meditation to focus and draw attention to the present moment and embodied experience.

Why might visualisation and imagination lead to adaptive outcomes?

Visualisation and imagination can **ground** an individual in the **present moment** through focused attention. These practices typically involve a meditative awareness that brings attention to an imagined being with acute focus. This awareness may also be filled with a sense of curiosity and exploration of one's connection to that imagined landscape or being.

The experience of visualising or imagining these connections or embodiments can lead to **joy, gratitude, and love** for the beings that are brought into imagination. These activations of connection to place or nature, of memory and attachment, can enable a sense of **self-transcendence** and **interconnectedness** with the world or cosmos. The visualised or imagined connection to landscape, element, or being, typically involves taking another's perspective and sensing **reciprocity and kinship** in the loving relationship with that other.

These new perspectives can lead to profound **insights** into these deeper relationships with nature or other beings. Visualisation and imagination might activate memories that prompt further insights into own experiences and **integration** between practice and other aspects of one's life.

Example practice

Jamie Thomas, Sara Jones, and Jem Stone are practitioners of Wayapa Wuurk, an earth reconnection practice based on Indigenous and ancient peoples' wisdom of respecting and taking care of the earth as the starting point for holistic wellbeing.

The practice combines visualisation, storytelling, earth mindfulness, activated reciprocity and movement as an embodiment practice to connect with 14 Wayapa elements: Creator, Sun, Moon, Earth, Lightning, Rain, Wind, Tree, Air Element, Land Element, Water Element, Hunter, Gatherer, Child/Creator. Wayapa creates purpose through being in right relationship as stewards of the earth which then promotes wellbeing and a sense of a belonging.

The Wayapa Way of connecting to these elements can be practiced in three layers:

1. Through observing the natural environment and what she provides
2. Through remembering personal experiences
3. Through adding cultural layers by tapping into our own ancestral knowing, being and doing.

We don't want to protect Mother Earth, we want to create a world where Mother Earth doesn't need protecting because she's respected – this is the Wayapa Way.

6.5. Sharing with others

This activity group includes a host of nature-based activities that involve social interaction and sharing of experiences with other people. Sharing with others may not always seem ‘contemplative’ but is included here as an important practice alongside other activities, playing an important role in addressing ecological distress. Sharing with others can extend and externalise insights from contemplative nature engagement practices to create richer experiences and pathways for action at both individual and collective scales.

How to apply sharing with others in contemplative nature engagement practices

While simply practicing alongside each can provide a meaningful social connection, there are many activities that can support groups create a safe and social space for listening and sharing. For example:

Invite individuals to share a significant moment or experience they felt during a contemplative nature engagement practice.

Invite individuals to share something produced during a practice (e.g., drawing, writing, something collected in nature).

Use collective activities to create an interactive and social space together – e.g., building fire, preparing food or tea, caring for the setting or environment together. In many contexts, it will be valuable to begin with these kinds of activities, to establish a sense of trust.

Sounding together is a group meditative practice that can activate a strong group presence. It takes different forms in different contemplative traditions, including chanting, singing, simple resonance.

Tea ceremony (or simply drinking tea together) is a common way to facilitate a shared group experience or ritual.

Environmental action and practical caring for nature such as weeding or bush regeneration are particularly powerful ways to grow community and act for the environment together.

All sharing must be facilitated in a safe and respectful way, following principles that are established in Section 5.

Why might sharing with others help address eco-distress?

The act of sharing and listening with others should be coupled with deep **presence** in the experience. It is important to establish a grounding of trust, openness, and receptivity to one another through this presence.

Sharing with others will often lead to positive emotions like **joy, gratitude, and compassion** for others. Further, listening and sharing with people builds social connections and **interconnectedness** with human community.

Sharing one’s experiences in a social context is essential to the experiential cycle of learning. This process involves bringing **insights** into conscious awareness, where one must reflect on an experience and find language to communicate and externalise those new insights, learnings, or perspectives. As groups share insights and experiences, these can become part of individual and collective understanding and identity.

Listening, learning, and sharing can build **active and resilient communities**. Stronger communities broaden opportunities for **collective action** and can empower an individual’s or group’s sense of making a difference.





Example practices

Sharing with others as part of a nature contemplation practice

Sue Martin leads contemplative walks grounded in Ignatian Spirituality, providing opportunities for quiet contemplation, listening to God's presence in nature, and share the experience with others. Below describes a part of these contemplative walks where group members come together to share in the experience, and crystallise their reflections and insights.

Spiritual conversation is a part of Ignatian spirituality. On 'Being with God in Nature walks', this involves paying attention to what is "bubbling up" internally – the connections with the spirit or with nature, that are felt during the walk. Everyone joins in a MAGiS circle at the end of the walk, where they continue the practice of deep listening, and sharing what their inner experience is. Verbalising and sharing with others can crystallise those felt connections and build connections with other people. It is really a strong way of having a connection with those that have been on the experience together. The sharing is also a practice that affirms what has come up for an individual, so can be a powerful way of taking something from the contemplative walk back into everyday life.

Sharing with others as a nature-based practice that promotes contemplation, reflection, and action

Anne Lanyon is the coordinator of the Faith Ecology Network and leads a range of community activities that bring people together in ways that promote learning, reflection, community building, and care for the environment.

Anne and her church community started a Landcare Group. A key focus is about awareness raising and helping people explore the place where they find themselves, where the church is, the interconnectedness of where the community gathers, and grow in appreciation that we are all part of an interdependent whole. As the group works together quietly, they listen to the bush, share stories, and learn. These gatherings are marked by a spiritual atmosphere.

The experience is one of listening, sharing with each other, reflecting, learning about natural systems, and taking action. That process is cyclical: deepening wisdom, learning, understanding and action. Anne often hears people say how good they feel when they take time out to care for the bush and how much they love getting to know it. The more they know, the more they love, the more they care, and the better they feel.

Sharing with others as a strengthening of community that supports ongoing practice and action

Mari Rhydwen Roshi is a Zen Buddhist practitioner and teacher. Sangha (the Zen group community) is an important aspect of Zen and not only supports practice, but also compassionate action.

For example, while Zen groups in themselves may not initiate social action, there was a tradition of social action within the Diamond Sangha of action through related groups such as the Buddhist Peace Fellowship doing so. To clarify, not everyone in a sangha will necessarily share the same socio-political perspective but people who wish to initiate and participate in protest activities such as, for example, Contemplative Rebels within the broader Extinction Rebellion umbrella, may do so. A group of this name was initially started in Western Australia and when Mari returned to live in Sydney, she helped initiate a group there. As we found in the 1980s during anti-uranium protests, having protesters involved in bigger demonstrations whose practice is to sit silently in meditation can have a calming influence and provide a refuge for any other protestors who may simply need a break, or to dissociate themselves from any confrontation or aggression that may arise.

Sharing with others to witness the agency and intelligence of the more-than-human world

Maya Ward's co-becoming practice is a community process of meditation and writing in order to experience the voices of the more-than-human.

In the co-becoming process, we give ourselves over for aspects of nature to write through us. We discover that they are delighted to be met, they are delighted to give voice. Everything is alive and intelligent - it can be a powerful and profoundly intimate experience. We witness each other in this intimacy when we read aloud the words of nature, and are humbled by the trust and deep listening of the group. Practicing co-becoming as a community rather than individually is so important, because it grounds the spiritual experience of nature connection and delivers it as a gift, to both the human and the more-than-human worlds. We are seeing and we are being seen. We accept the gift of the wisdom given and work it into our worlds, bolstered by human and spiritual support. We are making culture together, guided by nature's voices.

7. Appendix

7.1. Author statements

The following statements from all co-authors include short biographies and influences on our work. There are further resources listed in section 7.2. to provide a more comprehensive account of the different sources that we draw upon in creating this guidance.

Katherine Johnson

Katherine is a scientist interested in how the brain develops through childhood into adulthood. She is particularly interested in how we pay attention and maintain that attention over time. Katherine has a special interest in Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). She examines the effects of exposure to nature and greenery on attention control.

Sara Jones

Sara is the Co-Creator of Wayapa Wuurk. Sara has lived on Australian First Nations Country for over 40 years with deep connections to her birth country of Canada and to her Welsh ancestry. Sara has worked and lived within the Australian First Nations Community for over 20 years and honours her many teachers including Jamie Thomas and his Elders, numerous First Nations' Elders and Mentors and most importantly, Mother Earth. A long journey of disconnection manifesting in trauma, addictive behaviours and unwellness was the lived experience that provided the fertile soil to plant the seeds of earth connection that grew into the Wayapa Wuurk tree that has spread its roots far and wide supporting others to remember their reciprocal relationship with this big, beautiful planet. Wayapa meets everyone where they are on their personal journey to collective wellbeing. Sara is a passionate life-long learner, studying breathwork, meditation, counselling, metaphysics, energy work and regenerative frameworks.

Cullan Joyce

Cullan has 20+ years of practice in contemplative traditions and communities, including Buddhist, Christian, Aboriginal and Nature-based practices. Cullan's PhD examined the underpinnings of Ancient Christian Contemplative practices. The mixture of practice and research in his background has helped him support the well-being of different environmental activist groups in Victoria and Australia since 2018. Activist spaces brought Cullan into collaboration with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics, which helped him discover how Australian spiritual practices might look through Aboriginal and post-colonial perspectives.

Anne Lanyon

Growing up in rural Victoria, living a simple life imbued with an Irish Catholic culture grounded Anne in a close relationship with the natural world as did experiences connecting to Country around Australia and overseas. Further theological education as an adult involved in religious and community education influenced Anne's worldview and life practices. Not having formal science education, Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Ilia Delio and Judy Cannato helped Anne connect science and spirituality. John Haught, Denis Edwards, Richard Rohr, John O'Donohue, Miriam Rose Ungunmurr, and Johanna Macy influenced her faith and contemplative practice. Engaging with diverse faith traditions and ecologists through the Faith Ecology Network opens Anne to all kinds of new insights.

Rose Macaulay

Rose's research bridges the experience of nature and cognitive experience of contemplative practices. Through her academic training and career so far, Rose has been influenced by Environmental Psychology researchers who are interested in the felt experience of connecting with nature and creating relationships with nature, as well as contemporary mindfulness researchers who aim to identify how the practice contributes to individual and collective wellbeing outcomes. Insights from the tradition of Forest Bathing and her personal practice of mindfulness meditation have further driven Rose's interest and motivation toward this work.

Belinda McCawley

Belinda's personal practice and what she shares with others are deeply influenced by a diverse tapestry of sources. It all started with mindfulness and the profound concept of "dadirri," an Aboriginal contemplative practice emphasising stillness and deep listening. This led Belinda to a transformative journey into Forest Therapy, inspired by childhood memories of connecting with nature. She has also been guided by John Muir Laws' Nature Journaling, Joanna Macy and John Seed's Deep Ecology, and the Global Coaching Academy honed her group facilitation and personal development skills. These influences have profoundly shaped Belinda's contemplative nature engagement, forging a meaningful connection with the natural world.

Sue Martin

Sue is the Ignatian Spirituality Being with God in Nature ministry coordinator. Formation in Earth justice and the Ignatian way of seeing the spirit in all things has led Sue to an understanding of the inter-connectedness of all life, an ecological consciousness. Being an Earthcarer desiring that Country will look after us as we look after Country has been learnt from First Nation elders including Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann who shares the practice of Dadirri to deeply listen. St Ignatius of Loyola developed the Spiritual Exercises; today the Exercises are going out into nature. A way of proceeding as integral ecologists, described in *Laudato Si'* the Pope's encyclical on care for our common home which encourages the practice of finding God in a leaf and gives us all a call to listen to the cry of the earth. Being involved in the climate leaders program in 2011 was formative for Sue, as an eco-warrior forming alliances across Landcare, Environmental Education and Green Faith.

Mari Rhydwen

Mari has been involved in Zen practice for nearly 50 years and so a short account of what influences her work as a Zen teacher is perhaps best answered by a koan:

A monk asked Yun Men, "What are the teachings of a whole lifetime?" Yun Men said, "An appropriate response."

In the case of responding to the climate crisis, Mari has facilitated meditations as a way for people to protest in a non-confrontational way. At city protests she encourages awareness of the sounds of both the birds and the buses. In this world, and this practice, exclude nothing! In formal Zen practice, everyone is welcome, those who work in extractive industries and those leading climate protest.

Christina Rowntree

Christina's nature-based facilitation of the labyrinth was shaped by Lauren Artress, founder of Veriditas. She applies "slow", sustainable praxis and especially rhizomic (collaborative, non-hierarchical) structures inspired by Deleuze and Guattari. Feminist principles guide Christina's work in the world, connecting her faith and spirituality, creating ritual, and facilitating eco-theological engagement with nature at Sophia's Spring, an eco-feminist faith community of the Uniting Church in Australia. The community listens for First Nations' wisdom, e.g., Dadirri, "deep listening". Christina's group facilitation skills have been enhanced by Joanna Macy, the Work that Reconnects, Open Space Technology, World Café, and the International School of Storytelling.

Jem Stone

Jem Stone is a First Nations Woman, Educator and Wellness Practitioner with mixed heritage from around the globe who is passionately integrating original knowledge systems into education and wellness spaces through connection and decolonised learning methods. Jem is a Wayapa Wuurrk Practitioner and Trainer, Rebirthing Breathwork Therapist and Educator, We Al-li and Dadirri Facilitator, Meditation and Yoga instructor, Cultural consultant, and trainer to the wellness industry. Jem is passionate about creating safe, inclusive, decolonised spaces for healing and spends much of her time learning from Elders and cultural teachers. Most importantly, Jem considers herself a contemporary Earth Custodian, finding deeper ways to connect and care for Country through decolonised ways of knowing, being and doing and encouraging others to remember their place as Earth People and live in stewardship. It's through this reciprocal relationship with the Earth that we receive wellbeing.

Jamie Marloo Thomas

Jamie Marloo Thomas is the co-founder of Wayapa Wuurrk® and is a Cultural Knowledge Conduit for his Elders as a Gunaikurnai man and descendant of the Maara Nation. Jamie understands the pain of disconnection from culture, which is why as an adult he devoted over 30 years to cultural mentoring and working within Aboriginal community in a diverse range of roles with the support and guidance of his Elders including Uncle Rob Lowe, Auntie Daphne Lowe, Auntie Adeline Thomas, Uncle Major "Moogy" Sumner, Auntie Loretta "Bubbles" Sumner, Uncle Banjo Clarke, Uncle Ivan Couzens, Uncle Albert Mullett, Uncle Henry Alberts and Uncle Bill Edwards.

In 2014, Jamie Thomas and Sara Jones co-founded Wayapa Wuurrk® in consultation with Jamie's Elders and community. Wayapa Wuurrk® means "Connect to the Earth" in the language of the Maara and Gunaikurnai peoples respectively. Jamie says, "imagine if the 8 billion people on Earth took care of their own special place".

Dianne Vella-Brodrick

Dianne has been an academic specialising in holistic health and wellbeing science for over 30 years. Her research focuses on identifying and promoting different strategies for enhancing mental health and wellbeing. Connecting meaningfully with nature is an area that has grown in importance as the scientific evidence to support the psychosocial health benefits increases. Understanding the different types of nature connections and the benefits and challenges that can ensue at an individual and societal level is a key interest. Dianne's aim is to work with young people to provide effective and engaging education, training and support about the role nature can play in their lives and how they can leverage their values in meaningful and proactive ways to promote sustainable practices.

Iain Walker

Iain is a social psychologist, with broad interests in social and environmental sustainability and in social justice. His research focus is on understanding processes of social, environmental, and behavioural change, with a broader aim of developing a better understanding of the interplay between theory and practice. Iain's goal is to join analyses of ecosystems, social systems, and egosystems, to enable durable, sustainable change. Consistent with this, his research is usually done in interdisciplinary contexts and appears in interdisciplinary outlets.

Maya Ward

Maya is a writer, teacher, activist, community artist, dancer, designer and gardener. Her co-becoming practice has been influenced by her lived experience as well as her PhD research into Indigenous practitioners of the tradition of Milkarri, the singing of Songspirals, Dadirri as taught by Miriam Rose Ungunmerr, and the poetry of Yolgnu elder Bill Neidjie. Her work also draws from indigenous scholars/ shamanistic practitioners Martin Prechtel, Malidoma Some, Bayo Akomolafe and others who emphasize animist/more-than-human agency, and Western philosophers who critique materialist reductionism while also offering practical techniques of engagement with and learning from the more-than-human, particularly Goethe, Rudolf Steiner, Carl Jung, Arnold and Amy Mindell, Stephen Buhner, Joanna Macy, Martin Heidegger, Alfred North Whitehead, Iain McGilchrist, Donna Haraway, David Abram, John Seed, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme among many others.

Kathryn Williams

Kathryn is a professor in environmental psychology, with interests in relationships between people and plants, ecosystems, fire, and urban greening. William James's explorations of mysticism were a key influence on Kathryn's doctoral studies of awe, serenity and wonder in forest environments, and sparked an enduring interest in the psychology of transcendent experiences. The holistic frameworks of classic environmental psychology have been a touchstone throughout her research, and this has been further enriched by social ecological systems and relational approaches to understand human-nature relationships. While grounded in the sciences, introspection and subjectivity play an important role in Kathryn's research, with her own experiences of spirituality and nature and providing motivation and insights for this work.



7.2. References

1. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). *Climate Change 2022 – Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Working Group II Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. (Cambridge University Press, 2023). doi:10.1017/9781009325844.
 2. Climate Council. *Summary of results from national study of the impact of climate-fuelled disasters on the mental health of Australians*. <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/survey-results-climate-disasters-mental-health/> (2022).
 3. Wardell, S. Naming and framing ecological distress. *MAT* **7**, 187–201 (2020).
 4. Smith, C., Allen, A., Schaffer, V. & Kannis-Dyand, L. Nature Relatedness May Play a Protective Role and Contribute to Eco-Distress. *Ecopsychology* eco.2023.0004 (2023) doi:10.1089/eco.2023.0004.
 5. Marks, E. & Hickman, C. Eco-distress is not a pathology, but it still hurts. *Nat. Mental Health* **1**, 379–380 (2023).
 6. Lymeus, F., Lindberg, P. & Hartig, T. Building mindfulness bottom-up: Meditation in natural settings supports open monitoring and attention restoration. *Consciousness and Cognition* **59**, 40–56 (2018).
 7. Roe, J. & Sachs, N. A. The Urban Nature Happiness Hypothesis. in *Infrastructure, Well-being and the Measurement of Happiness* (eds. Mahmoudi, H., Roe, J. & Seaman, K.) 133–150 (Routledge, 2022). doi:10.4324/9781003183242-10.
 8. Castelo, N., White, K. & Goode, M. R. Nature promotes self-transcendence and prosocial behavior. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* **76**, 101639 (2021).
 9. Sturm, V. E. *et al.* Big smile, small self: Awe walks promote prosocial positive emotions in older adults. *Emotion* **22**, 1044–1058 (2020).
 10. Garland, E. L. & Fredrickson, B. L. Positive psychological states in the arc from mindfulness to self-transcendence: extensions of the Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory and applications to addiction and chronic pain treatment. *Current Opinion in Psychology* **28**, 184–191 (2019).
 11. Williams, K. & Harvey, D. Transcendent experience in forest environments. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* **21**, 249–260 (2001).
 12. West, S. *et al.* A relational turn for sustainability science? Relational thinking, leverage points and transformations, *Ecosystems and People*, **16**, 304–325 (2020).
- ### Further reading
- Artress, L. (2006) *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice*. Riverhead.
- Bortoft, H. (1996) *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way of Science*. Edinburgh: Lindisfarne Press.
- Buhner, S. H. (2014) *Plant Intelligence and the Imaginal Realm: Beyond the Doors of Perception Into the Dreaming of the Earth*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.
- Cannato, J. (2006) *Radical Amazement*. Sorin Books.
- Dunn, C. (2021) *Rewilding the urban soul*. Scribe UK.
- Gay'wu Group of Women. (2019) *Songspirals: Sharing Women's Wisdom of Country through Songlines*. Allen and Unwin
- Guattari, F. and Deleuze, G. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Haught, J.F. (2021) *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*. Orbis Books.
- James, W. (1902) *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: Collier Books.
- Johnson, E.A. (2005) *Ask The Beasts, Darwin and the God of Love*. Bloomsbury.
- Jordan, M. and Hinds, J. (2018) *Ecotherapy Theory Research and Practise*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005) *Wherever You Go There You Are*. Hachette Books.
- Kotte, D. *et al.* (eds) (2019) *International handbook of forest therapy*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Li, Q. (2018) *Shinrin-Yoku: The Art and Science of Forest Bathing*. Penguin Life.
- Macy, J. and Johnstone, C. (2022) *Active Hope*. New World Library.
- Muir Laws, J. (2016) *The Laws Guide to Nature Drawing and Journaling*. HeyDay Books.
- Neidjie, B. (1989) *Story About Feeling*. Broome: Magabala Books.
- Prechtel, M. (2014) *The Smell of Rain on Dust: Grief and Praise*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, 2015, St Pauls
- O'Donohue, J. (2010) *Four Elements*. Transworld.
- Rohr, R. (2019) *The Universal Christ*. Convergent Books.
- Swimme, B. (2022) *Cosmogenesis: An Unveiling of the Expanding Universe*. Catapult.
- Ungunmerr-Baumann, M.-R. (2002) 'Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness'. Emmaus Productions.
- Veriditas: <https://veriditas.org/>
- Ward, M. (2012) *The comfort of water: a River pilgrimage*. Transit Lounge
- Maya Ward, co-becoming: www.mayaward.com.au
- Washington, H. (2019) *A Sense of Wonder Towards Nature*. Routledge.



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE