

Enhancing the Experience of Connection With Nature: Participants' Responses to the MAPIN Strategy

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Abstract

This article describes individual and collective experiences of engaging and connecting with nature using a mindful perception approach, the MAPIN Strategy. It represents a qualitative review of the worksheets completed by participants during a number of MAPIN nature connection sessions. This article presents the range of cognitive, affective, and spiritual responses for constituent activities that constitute a MAPIN session, some of the insights and reflections by participants, and participant's reflections about their experiences of connection. The essence of the overall collective experience of connection was described as an immersive, relational, and loving one of being bonded and nurtured by nature, or some aspect of a natural area, characterized by a variety of positive cognitive, affective, and spiritual states of mind that led to increased awareness, perspective, and an expanded sense of self and being-in-the-world. The article ends with a suggestion of why the MAPIN Strategy may be an effective tool for evoking and/or heightening experiences of connection with nature.

Introduction

Over the past few centuries and in particular the past half century, humanity has become increasingly disconnected, physically and psychologically, from natural areas. We no longer have the same sense of relationship with the natural world. This disconnection is, in one sense, sadly ironic in an age of increasing technological connectivity and social networking. We live our lives for the most part with little direct

engagement and affective connection with natural areas. As American environmental pioneer John Muir observed over a century ago,

Most people are on the world, not in it—having no conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them—undiffused, separate, and rigidly alone like marbles of polished stone touching but separate. (Wolfe, 1979)

When we have no direct relationship with nature, it becomes easier to maintain the destructive fictions of our collective psyche: that we and our day-to-day activities are separate from nature “out there,” that we can do what we feel we need to do to feed our insatiable appetites without understanding the real consequences of our actions while the planet and its self-regulating biosphere sustain us (White, 2012; Worthy, 2008). We may experience nonhuman nature in our lives, but it is not part of our psyche, our sense of self (Naess, 1973). Given the importance of nature to our psychological well-being (Berto, 2005; Bragg, 1992; Ulrich et al., 1991), we need to encourage people to discover the possibilities and benefits of experiencing meaningful affective connections with nature (Hinds & Sparks, 2008).

There are many activities for encouraging nature connection based on a variety of educational, psychological, and therapeutic philosophies. Some approaches used in Australia that involve enhancing human-nature connection to varying degrees include vision quests (Baillie, 2003), deep ecology workshops (Bragg, 1996), land restoration programs (Williams, 2010), nature-guided therapy (Burns, 1998), ecotourism (Perkins, 2010), some environmental education programs, and neo-pagan gatherings. This article explores the experience of connecting with nature as facilitated through a mindful perception approach, the MAPIN Strategy, developed by the author. While the MAPIN Strategy, a newcomer to ecopsychology

practice, shares a similar intent to the aforementioned approaches, that is, enhancing nature connection, it differs in a number of ways. It is a highly structured, relational, and sensual approach with a focus on direct affective individual–nonhuman other engagement. The primary approach to connection is the expansion of consciousness, awareness, and sense of self through the experience of enhanced engagement with nonhuman nature using a mindful perception strategy. It was significantly influenced not by existing approaches used in Australia but rather by mindfulness practice as popularized by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Kabat-Zinn, 2005), as well as the author's personal orientation toward being in natural areas. Following a previous pilot project described in this journal (White, 2011), which trialed the strategy and described key themes and experiences of heightened ecological consciousness of the author, the same but slightly refined approach was applied to groups of participants in a variety of natural settings. This article reports on the self-reported experiences of perceptual engagement and nature connection by these participants. It seeks to identify the key contributors to individual and collective phenomenological experience of nature connection using the MAPIN Strategy.

Method

MAPIN is an acronym for Mindful-Affective-Perception-Imagination-in-Nature. It represents the techniques used for enhancing human-nature connectivity: mindfulness, positive affect, sensual perception, and imaginal processes undertaken in natural areas. The MAPIN Strategy provides the guiding framework used by the facilitator to guide participants through a series of activities aimed at facilitating mindfulness, increasing perceptual acuity, and evoking an experience of nature connection. It was developed by the author in his doctoral research into ecological consciousness development (White, 2009) and was substantially informed by a number of writers in the fields of mindfulness and perception (Abram, 1996; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Rodaway, 1994; Sewall, 1999). It is described in more complete detail in the previous article exploring the MAPIN Strategy (White, 2011).

Mindfulness is a contemplative technique for becoming present to lived experience and for creating the mental space or perspective to nonjudgmentally observe inner and outer oriented events and processes as they unfold (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Mindfulness arises by increasing the quality of attention with the right attitude to experience in the present moment:

We live first and foremost in an extended present, which is the primary reality. And the quality of that present should be our greatest concern. (Berleant, 1992)

Sensual perception (Rodaway, 1994) recognizes that our physical senses are not just passive receptors for particular environmental stimuli but actively involved in structuring that information to create an understanding of reality. If we can transform the way we perceive our reality, then we create the potential for heightening and deepening our experience and awareness of our world.

The strategy was also developed based upon the following considerations or premises:

- most people have a self-limiting concept of selfhood that excludes nonhuman nature. Expanding self-construal to include an environmental identity (Clayton, 2003) or an ecological self (Naess, 1986) would increase relationship closeness with nature with associated psychological and behavioral benefits (Bragg, 1996; Cialdini et al., 1997; Thomashow, 1995);
- most people tend to have a superficial perceptual engagement with reality, that is, an inadequate perception of their immediate surrounds (Rodaway, 1994; Sewall, 1999);
- positive experiences within natural environments, even walks within urban parkland (Bragg, 1992), offer restorative and affective benefits that can enhance psychological well-being (Berto, 2005; Bragg, 1992; Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989);
- a strong affective and/or spiritual connection with nature in its infinite expressions can foster positive environmental values, attitudes, and behaviors (Fisher, 2002; Roszak et al., 1995);
- intimate or affective engagement with nonhuman nature is essential in forming emotional bonds, environmental identification, and positive psychological well-being (Hinds & Sparks, 2008);
- spiritual and transcendent experiences in nature can be evoked through heightened states of consciousness, an intimate sense of place, loss of I-other distinctions, and the timeless flow of experience. These can catalyze a range of life-altering or meaningful outcomes (Williams & Harvey, 2001).

The MAPIN sessions were conducted in Sydney, Australia, over an 18-month period in natural settings, primarily in dedicated nature reserves in Sydney's northern beaches and adjacent to Sydney Harbour. These sites of high naturalness are characterized by eucalypt forest with heath understory on eroded Hawkesbury Sandstone landscape. Walks through these vegetation types were usually adjacent to bodies of water such as the Harbour, a lake formed by a small dam, along a creek ending at a waterfall. Wildlife encountered was generally in the form of native birds.

Each MAPIN session, normally conducted early mornings between 7 and 9 am, consisted of the following activities:

- (i) Place familiarization: a brief assessment of a place's natural characteristics such as vegetation communities, geological features, and drainage patterns.
- (ii) Meditation: a 5–10 minute breathing-focused meditation to calm the mind and heart, become aware of the physical and mental states, and become focused on being present.
- (iii) Sound mapping: the participant recorded each sound in the soundscape, mapping its source, direction, and distance.
- (iv) Listening: one sound or the entire soundscape was selected and engaged mindfully with an attitude of care, respect, and curiosity.
- (v) Vision: a scanning vision was used to identify any potential objects of interest. Once an object was selected, the participant focused his or her attention on it and engaged it mindfully.
- (vi) Touch: an object of interest was selected, and it was caringly touched, held, stroked, and/or caressed.
- (vii) Connecting: the aim of this activity was to engage and connect with a particular object or landscape feature, using the senses, imagination, visualization, dialogue, intuition, and the use of emotional outreaching, that is, empathy and love. The hugging and/or touching of objects was encouraged.

People participating in the MAPIN sessions were either paying participants as part of a commercial service offered by the author or were part of a conference workshop held early in 2012 in Sydney. Nine different groups, usually consisting of between four and eight participants, were included in this analysis. Eight of the sessions involved regular participants, although there were participants in these sessions that participated just once or twice. One session involved a conference workshop at which there were 18 individuals who completed worksheets. In total 38 individuals were the subject of this review, from which 50 worksheets were collected and analyzed. The worksheets allowed for open-ended responses to help participants fully record their responses, experiences, observations, reflections, and views about their nature experience and the MAPIN session. Given the sessions were not part of a research project but rather, largely, a commercially based offering of a contemplative activity, no personal or demographic information was requested. The majority of participants were women over the age of 50.

As facilitator, I provided sufficient instructions to explain the theoretical basis behind the MAPIN Strategy, particularly about mindfulness and perception, and how to approach and undertake each of the activities. Explanation for each activity was provided immediately prior to the activity. Instructions, particularly during the introduction, emphasized the importance of retaining a mindful state

of awareness upon both the participant's outer and inner environments. During mindful walking to the session site, or between activity sites, I would provide reminders of mindfulness that included maintaining attention on the breathing rhythm and using a scanning approach to using the senses.

Given the importance of affective states in enhancing relational experiences, I encouraged participants to give priority to their affective responses and states, rather than spend too much time describing objects. It is my experience, personally as well as from listening to people describe their nature experiences, that many people find it easier to describe, for example, the appearance of objects rather than fully express feelings, emotions, and spiritual insights or reflections. I also made it clear that the worksheets were an aid to acknowledging and understanding their experiences of nature interaction and were optional. It was not uncommon for people to leave no or minimal responses for some of the activities. Some people did not feel like writing down their experiences, some found that it broke the flow of mindfulness by becoming cognitively focused, while others got swept up in the experience and did not have the time or inclination to write. These people were few in number, and many people appreciated the time to capture the fleeting nature of experience through the writing process. Like mindfulness, rich or expressive writing in this context is almost an art form. I refer to it, when it is flowing, as automatic experiential writing where mindfulness or awareness is still partially retained upon the response and the stimuli while writing as richly and succinctly as possible.

Apart from some questions from participants regarding my instruction, there was no talking during the session. This "no chat" approach was requested by me to participants in order to minimize distraction from being mindful. It was made clear that this was not a normal socially oriented walk with other people but rather a contemplative activity designed to increase inner awareness and shifts in awareness, consciousness, and sense of self. Once the session had ended and the worksheets had been handed in, the group members were encouraged to share their experiences and insights.

Analysis

Worksheet responses were carefully reviewed to identify the perceptual focus for each activity, the key responses, and meaningful insights or reflections. These were placed into summary tables for each MAPIN session. Following this initial distillation of responses, relevant response categories were identified and used to arrange the next round of distillation of responses. All statements, phrases, or key words from the first distillation process, that is, the session summary tables for each activity as well as participant feedback, were then

placed into combined session activity tables using the identified categories. These tables provided the final data from which the frequency of responses was calculated and meaningful insights and reflections extracted and incorporated into the results section.

Results

The sequence of the session activities after the sound mapping activity provides the basis for presenting the results. No analysis was undertaken of sound mapping due to the fact that (1) it did not require mindfulness and (2) the maps were not relevant and/or informative with regard to the article’s focus of affective experiences when engaging nature.

Listening

While the sound map involved hearing and recording sounds in the surrounding area, listening involved a more active, focused, and mindful approach to the aural environment. I refer to this activity as *listening* rather than *hearing* to accentuate this approach—we may be superficially aware of sounds or not (hearing), but listening infers a more involved, potentially relational awareness of specific sounds or soundscapes. The most common focus was bird calls (17/50), followed by sounds associated with moving water (11/50) and the general soundscape (9/50). The responses identified from listening to these aural stimuli were highly varied; the more frequent are listed in Table 1. Although only noted in several worksheets, it was indicated by many participants that this mindful, affective approach to listening helped to revitalize their awareness of their surrounds, helped them become more aware of their inner states, and helped them let go of extraneous thoughts and affect.

Vision

The most common focuses were trees (14/42), shrubs (10/42), and bodies of water (9/42) such as creeks, waterfalls, and Harbour. The

Table 1. Common Responses to the Listening Activity

COGNITIVE RESPONSE		AFFECTIVE RESPONSE		SPIRITUAL RESPONSE	
Peaceful/ calm mind	14	Joy/happiness	14	Connection (place/nature/life)	8
Appreciation	6	Comforting/ nurturing	7		
Childhood memories	6	Serenity	6		
Curiosity	4				

Table 2. Common Responses to the Vision Activity

COGNITIVE RESPONSE		AFFECTIVE RESPONSE		SPIRITUAL RESPONSE	
Appreciation	19	Wonder	7	Sense of connection (place/nature/spirit)	5
Respect	6	Joy	7		
		Loving/loved	6		
		Humility	5		
		Nurtured/ comforted	5		

most common responses in the participants’ experience of this activity are provided in Table 2. The most common response was appreciation of various qualities such as beauty, intricacy, design, intelligence, and creativity.

Touch

Like the vision activity, the most common focus for mindful touching was trees, followed by shrubs. As can be seen in Table 3, the affective responses dominated, with a sense of joy being the most common response.

Connecting

The most frequent focus for participants was once again trees, followed by bodies of water such as creeks, waterfalls, and Harbour and then the general landscape or surrounds of the connecting activity. In terms of the level or type of connection, there was a high level of consistency of connection. Of those asked, 100% of participants reported a sense of connectedness to the session’s environs,

Table 3. Common Responses to the Touch Activity

COGNITIVE RESPONSE		AFFECTIVE RESPONSE		SPIRITUAL RESPONSE	
Appreciation	8	Joy	11	Sense of connection (place/nature/spirit)	8
Mental calmness	7	Love	10	Recognition of sentience of nature’s beings	4
		Nurtured/ protected	8		

Table 4. Common Responses to the Connecting Activity

COGNITIVE RESPONSE		AFFECTIVE RESPONSE		SPIRITUAL RESPONSE	
Sense of peace and mental calm	20	Nurtured/protected	10	Sense of connection (place/nature/spirit)	16
Appreciation	9	Wonder & awe	10	Expanded sense of self to include nonhuman other	7
		Love	7		
		Joy/happiness	7		
		Humility	5		

97% to nature in general, 94% to some higher sense of self, and 70% to some spiritual reality, energy, or presence.

The most frequent responses were peacefulness, a sense of connection, feeling nurtured, and wonder and awe. The more frequent responses are outlined in Table 4.

Some of the reflections and insights noted during this activity were meaningful in terms of describing an experience of or perspective about connection. These observations, paraphrased for clarity, include

- I have a feeling of being immersed within its [tree] unfolding form;
- The tree’s form is symbolic of our spiritual journey as it reaches up to the sky and spreads its roots down into the earth;
- The tree reaches into my awareness just like it reaches upward and downward;
- This space holds me; it feels like a refuge or holding space from the outside world;
- This guided session reminded me of being in a church of my childhood: I enjoyed feeling safe, the session’s structure, being guided, and the sacredness of nature;
- I came to view nature as my teacher;
- I felt deep gratitude and humility of being a part of something much vaster than I;
- I could sense other worlds beyond the surfaces of this world.

Participants self-reported experience of connection

The broad spectrum of reflections and insights, outlined in Table 5, indicates the wide variety of experiences and perspectives associated with connecting with various aspects of the participant’s surrounds.

When these descriptors are supplemented with extracted quotes of insights and reflections made in the session assessment, a more comprehensive understanding of the experience of nature connection unfolds. The insights and reflections about participants’ experience of connection that go beyond the descriptors above were (paraphrased by the author, words italicized by the author indicate important processes for and outcomes of connection as interpreted by the author)

- It is important to create *physical and psychological distance* from the outside world;
- The *immersive* experience led to a sense of peace, calmness, gentleness & love;
- One needs to be *patient*, to just sit and observe to feel more connected;
- I observed new things by being mindful, which helped raise my *awareness of perceptions*;
- *Memories* of previous joyful times in nature *unlocked* emotions.

Discussion

Connecting with nature

In addressing the article’s question, what is the experience of nature connection using the MAPIN Strategy, the meaning of the term “connecting” should be clarified within the context of nature connection. The term, deriving from the Latin *conectere*, meaning “to join together”¹, refers to the process of joining two things, to a bond, union, or relationship. It can also infer integration, which is defined as the process of combining with other things into a single larger system. *Connecting* in this article therefore refers to the process of bonding, integrating, and/or combining through respectful, empathic relationship with another being or object.

To begin to respond to the article’s question, I first summarize all four tables down to the most frequent responses. There are five responses that frequently arose for many of the participants when sensorially engaging natural spaces. They were

- (1) Calmness/peaceful mind;
- (2) Joy & happiness;
- (3) Appreciation;
- (4) Love;
- (5) Connection.

All these qualities were also identified in the response to the question of nature connection, as can be noted in Table 5. The

¹Macmillan Dictionary, <http://www.macmillandictionary.com>.

Table 5. Responses by Participants to the Question of What Their Experience Was of Nature Connection (Bold Responses Indicate the Most Frequent Responses from Session Activities)

COGNITIVE			AFFECTIVE		SPIRITUAL		
STATE OF MIND	AWARENESS	OBSERVATION	EMOTIONS	FEELINGS	NATURE	IDENTITY	SPIRIT/LIFE
Peace/calm	Increased awareness of environment	Nature has a capacity to increase understanding	Happiness & joy	Immersed/held	Sense of oneness	Sense of wholeness & higher self	Greater sense of life meaning
Expansive/open mindedness	Increased awareness of capacity to connect	Increased capacity to observe things usually ignored or missed	Love (loved and/or loving)	Nurtured/comforted	Sacredness of life-forms	Centered within one's deeper being	Unity of life
Appreciative (of beauty, diversity, complexity)	Importance of getting away from routines, roles & daily life	Recognition of the wildness of nature	Wonder & awe	Humility	Interconnected	Expansive sense of self (eco-identity)	Strong sense of spiritual reality
Being present	Increased awareness of perceptual acuity	Recognition of the cycles of nature	Empathy toward nonhuman other	Stillness/inner tranquility	Sense of being home		
Relief to be in nature	Evocation of childhood memories of nature		Solace from negative state	Uplifted	Sense of reverence toward nature		
Revitalized senses, mind & body	Heightened awareness			A sense of grounded to Earth	Connected/sense of being bonded with nature		
	Realization that connection is necessary for well-being			A sense of freedom			
				Safety/protected			

sensorial activities use a specific perceptual mode, that is, perception in a mindful and active mode, for engaging the environment in a way that encourages increased awareness and a sense of connection to nature or some aspect of the perceptual field. Whether this connection occurs or not, it should be noted that the associated responses (Tables 1–4) do not necessarily represent or equate to “the” experience of connection. While they do not describe an experience of connection with the things engaged with (except the descriptor “sense of connection”), they do contribute to a sense of connection during the specific activity and/or the overall experience of connection across the session, as reflected upon by each participant at the end of the session. Given that 100% of participants, when they

were asked, reported a sense of connection with their environs/place or thing, then these responses should be viewed as beneficial outcomes in their own right as well as contributors toward a participant’s overall experience of connection. For example, the experience of connecting can include peace, joy, and love although individually these qualities or responses do not represent a sense of connection per se. The experience of connection appears to not be one particular response but a spectrum of responses that fluxes over a period of time, that varies between participants, and that contributes to the wholeness of the experience of connection.

The affective responses for the activities are consistent with research that indicates that positive affect increases when individuals

are exposed, in a positive way, to natural environments (Hartig & Staats, 2006; vandenBerg et al., 2007). While these were the most frequent contributors to the experience of connection, many others were identified in participants' reflections about their experience of connection; these are summarized in Table 5. Participants' reflections on their experience of connection elicited a much greater diversity of responses and/or meanings than the individual activities, perhaps indicating the importance of setting aside time at the end of each session to reflect on their overall experience of the session and/or their sense of connection. Individual activities elicit more tangible experiences that are easily noted at the time, but perspective or time may be needed to allow some overall experience to unfold in its own time, at its own pace. Patience is needed, as one participant noted. This is where taking a receptive and patient orientation to the connecting experiences is important: being too hasty to engage or move on to the next activity may undermine the potential for experiencing or recognizing the connection experience. So do unrealistic assumptions and false or habitual expectations, or fears. Knowing when and how to be totally open or rather totally receptive during the process of engagement is another example of applied patience. Participants can be too eager or impatient to experience something notable or obviously meaningful that they let expectation rush them through the engagement process rather than letting things unfold to the senses and heart more slowly or at a pace slower than expected by the participants.

Reflective time, that is, a short period allowed for meditation and/or silent reflection, at the end of each session was useful for gaining perspective about the session, whether it was about the session's experiences, personal and/or collective issues, or life meaning. Those reflections identified in Table 5 provide the collective interpretation of the processes, outcomes, and meanings associated with the experience of connection. Many of these reflections are identified as participants are sitting quietly in a state of connection self-enquiring what has just been experienced. The fact that descriptors alluding to connection were not existent or dominant in each of the activities may mean that the experience of connecting unfolded and fluxed across the session, particularly at the end during and following the connecting activity. The author's experience of connecting reinforces this interpretation: connecting is often a gradual, unfolding experience of bonding, integrating, and relating that often fluxes over and beyond each of the individual activities, often becoming strongest during the connecting activity and the following concluding meditation.

What is not included in this table are the insights and reflections extracted from the worksheets that the author considered were highly

relevant for identifying other processes that encourage or deepen the experience of nature connection. These are (paraphrased, processes or outcomes considered important by the author are italicized)

- *Symbolism* is a common and important approach to interpreting meaning, expanding awareness, and increasing the depth of relationship and connection;
- There is a rhythmic *unfolding of meaning* through periods of movement and stillness;
- *Patience* is an important quality for discovery to let meaning unfold in its own time;
- Deeper experiences of connection can be encouraged by *intuiting* other dimensions and realities beyond the surface world of the senses;
- There is an upward/sky/spirit and downward/earth/soul pathway or experience to our spiritual journey;
- A sense of place may include it feeling like a refuge, a *holding space* away from the outside world. The depth of connection can be affected by the physical and psychological *distance* from suburban reality, roles, and responsibilities;
- The experience of being *loved and loving* another is an important contributor to connection;
- Recollecting childhood *memories* of times in nature can help release emotions.

It would be tempting to respond to the article's question about the experience of nature connection by saying the experiences of connection, if experience equates to its constituent cognitive, affective, and spiritual responses or contributors, are represented by the combination of all the descriptors and meanings in Table 5 and the insights above. When dealing with such a varied spectrum of responses or insights from an amalgam of worksheets representing numerous disparate groups over 18 months in a variety of natural settings, it would appear tenuous to provide just one overall essence of the connecting experience. But as is the nature of phenomenological inquiry, describing an overall essence of an experience can be done by a process of refinement, of frequent extracting and reflecting on meaningful descriptors. I consider, based on the aforementioned results, that the essence of the nature connection experience for participants using the MAPIN Strategy was

an immersive, relational, and loving one of being bonded and nurtured by nature, or some aspect of a natural area, characterized by a variety of positive cognitive, affective, and spiritual states that led to increased awareness, perspective, and an expanded sense of self and being-in-the-world.

Feedback of participants

Finally, I want to briefly consider the participants' views of the MAPIN Strategy and why it is an effective, powerful approach for evoking a sense of connection with nature. Firstly, participants expressed their appreciation and satisfaction toward the individual session(s) and/or the MAPIN Strategy. All participants, according to their written responses, achieved their objective or intent for participating in the MAPIN session, which were generally nature connection, the practice of mindfulness, and the desire for peace of mind. They were encouraged to express on the worksheet at the beginning of each session a specific objective or intent in order to help keep them on track during the session and enable them to assess whether they achieved what they had hoped to get out of the session. From this perspective, the MAPIN Strategy can be considered effective in helping participants achieve connection, mindfulness, peace of mind, and other outcomes. Certainly I recognize that some of the objectives could also have been met in other ways, even in just walking through a natural area. But the depth of affective and spiritual responses also indicates that it is not just "a walk in the park" either. It could be viewed more as a brief contemplative dwelling in place that elicits a heightened perspective toward nature, self, and life. Written and verbal feedback from participants, however, made it clear that this approach was unique, effective, and very different from a "normal" walk through natural areas.

In considering the comments, both written and verbal, of participants, as well as my own experience of the MAPIN Strategy over 6 years, I believe that what makes the MAPIN Strategy effective in facilitating both deep experiences of nature connection and heightened well-being is its combination of techniques applied in a structured, guided way to help participants (1) become mindful of their inner and outer worlds, (2) facilitate mental calmness and inner peace, and (3) increase their capacity to more acutely perceive what is there to be perceived. These all contribute toward shifting awareness, possibly states of consciousness, which leads to an altered perspective and sense of self. Expanding on these points using the framework of the letters of the acronym, I propose the following techniques or contexts for MAPIN's effectiveness:

- *Mindfulness* detaches participants from their responses so they are freed from getting lost in their responses, allowing for an open, nonjudgmental mindscape. It creates a mindscape ripe for self-discovery and revealing inner states and outer worlds often ignored or unperceived;
- *Affective engagement* opens up the heart space or the capacity to empathically and lovingly reach out to nonhuman other, as well as to be open to feeling love, grace, and intimacy. These states contribute to releasing negative states of mind, increased

sense of control over negative states, and the self-healing process for stress, anxiety, and other conditions;

- *Sensual perception* facilitates a more active, intimate, and relational perceptual process that facilitates an awareness of perceptual reciprocity, that is, the two-way flow of exchange of perception and/or awareness between human and nonhuman other. Increased awareness contributes to an expanded or heightened perspective toward nature, the environment, and self, including personal and global issues of concern;
- *Imagination* seeks to go beyond the surface appearances and engage the inner senses and processes, for example, intuition, visualization, and dialoguing with nonhuman other, to explore what possibly lies beyond where the physical senses' capacity ends. Imaginal activities contribute to opening the mind and heart up to new possibilities and experiences, through which richer understandings of nature and self may flow;
- *Nature*, or rather nonhuman beings and landscapes, offers the medium to revitalize our senses and reengage with the source of life and our own physical and spiritual source.

These techniques situated within natural spaces create the psychological and physical space, what I refer to as a refuge or holding space, to let go of extraneous cognitive and affective states and open up the mental and affective space to let things unfold in their own way and timing. It is, in my experience as well as in the responses of participants, not the naturalness of the setting (although it must be moderately natural with minimal human activity or noise) but rather the quality of the mental engagement process that is critical. Mindfulness is the key approach to creating the spaces for more meaningful engagements that may elicit connection. It is a discipline that requires regular practice to become competent and consistent. Many participants however, in their first foray into it, experienced its fundamental benefit: it is a way of being rather than doing; it is a nonjudgmental awareness of present experience rather than a mindless loss of observational awareness to abstraction, preoccupation, judgment, and/or habitual behavior.

The MAPIN Strategy for nature connection provides a novel, structured approach for evoking therapeutic, empowering, and meaningful experiences of nature connection and increasing understanding about human-nature relationships that can contribute toward individual and collective psychological well-being.

Future research

Helping people connect with nature has potential applications in medical and psychotherapeutic contexts. Future research may

explore if the MAPIN Strategy can increase the psychological well-being, including resilience, and immunological functioning of people with specific mental conditions, for example, depression, and physical illness, such as breast cancer. Cancer diagnosis and treatment are routinely associated with high levels of emotional distress, with reactions such as fear, confusion, anxiety, and anger being common responses. Cancer diagnosis and treatment are also associated with other psychological responses such as searching for meaning and purpose, spiritual or existential doubt, and identity issues (Patterson et al., 2010).

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programs have been used in medical settings, including oncology psychosocial situations, around the world since the early 1990s as an adjunct treatment for improving psychological functioning of cancer patients. In a meta-analysis of the health benefits of MBSR (Grossman et al., 2004), both controlled and uncontrolled studies assessing the psychological and physical effects indicated a relatively strong effect of mindfulness interventions for improving patients' ability to cope with physical symptoms and psychological symptoms including stress and a range of affective states (anger, anxiety, depression). Facilitating closer experiential relationships with natural areas using the mindfulness-based MAPIN Strategy has the potential to provide an adjunct intervention service to better help people with psychological and physical illness cope with a spectrum of psychological and spiritual challenges that impacts upon their emotional and spiritual well-being. For some people, MAPIN may be a more effective or attractive intervention technique to the indoors MBSR; therefore research should assess its potential in this regard.

Conclusion

This article has reported on a specific Australian approach for enhancing human-nature connectedness. The MAPIN Strategy described in this article evoked an experience of connectedness to nature, self, and/or spirit in groups of participants that involved a wide spectrum of cognitive, affective, and spiritual responses. It was argued that while most of the responses do not describe an experience of connection, they can each be viewed as contributors to the overall experience of connection. An overall portrait of the participants' experience of connecting with nature was drawn based upon the responses, insights, and reflections. Given the range of positive responses and the consistent achievement of participants' intention for connection, the MAPIN Strategy can be considered an effective approach for facilitating connection with nature and offers an integrated approach for enhancing the experience of connecting with nonhuman nature.

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