

**INDIGENOUS WISDOM IN A WESTERN SETTING:
APPLYING A MORE-THAN-HUMAN METHODOLOGY TO EXPLORE
CONNECTION WITH NATURE**

Imogen O'Connor

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of a Master of Arts in Ecology and Spirituality

Mathas mara dhuit,

Goodness of sea be thine,

Mathas talamh dhuit,

Goodness of earth be thine,

Mathas nèimhe.

Goodness of heaven.

Excerpt from 'Good Wishes', Alexander Carmichael *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and incantations*, Vol. 3, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1940) pp.232-233,

[accessed on 24.06.2025 at The Internet Archive

<<https://archive.org/details/carminagadelicah30carm/page/232/mode/2up>>].

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I declare that this dissertation is an original work, in which all the sources of the material have been acknowledged and referenced. While AI tools have been used to assist in locating and verifying sources, including identifying literature to clarify concepts and for checking grammar and spelling, no content has been copied or inserted verbatim into the text. In addition, the ideas generated, and conclusions reached are solely attributed to the collaboration of the co-researchers, the texts cited and conversations with others who are mentioned in the acknowledgements.

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I pay tribute to the ecosystem, where I live and work in County Sligo, on the Northwest coast of Ireland. This place comprises amongst many others, tree persons, bird persons, water persons, badger persons, cat persons, visiting human persons and weather persons - all of whom abundantly sustain me through their complex and novel interrelations. This ecosystem has been my valued companion, teacher and co-researcher in this project. I acknowledge all who participated directly and indirectly in this research. I also pay tribute to all beings who are suffering as a result of the privilege I enjoy at every level of my lifestyle, which I acknowledge contributes to local and global inequalities including the current ecological degradation and climate crisis.

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous wisdom in a Western Setting: Applying a more-than-human methodology to explore connection with nature.

This study explored, in an Irish setting, sixty-five participants' experiences of connection and communication with natural places, their place-based cultural influences and their environmental beliefs and behaviours. It combined survey and interviews within a more-than-human participatory research (MtH-PR) and transpersonal methodological framework. This methodology was designed to be congruent with the research questions, reflective of the more-than-human relationality under investigation and aligned with providing transformational prospects for all participants in the study. The study revealed strong connections and embodied communications with place, shaped by the folklore and cultural traditions of a post-colonial nation. These attuned attachment relationships offered opportunities for a wide range of benefits for humans and for reciprocal responses towards nature places involving practical and spiritual caring and wider engagement in a range of pro-environmental behaviours. There was evidence to suggest that a majority of participants held a relational ontology rooted in Celtic spirituality showing similarities with global indigenous worldviews. These included beliefs in the sentience of nature, often recognising its intrinsic sacredness and associated ethical responsibilities. Nature communications were largely accompanied by feelings of awe, often resulting from transpersonal experiences, including personifications of aspects of the environment viewed as calming or mothering. An evaluation of the application MtH-PR revealed positive impacts including the generation of theoretical inspiration and methodological direction, ethical congruency, creative presentation of data, and benefits for the participants.

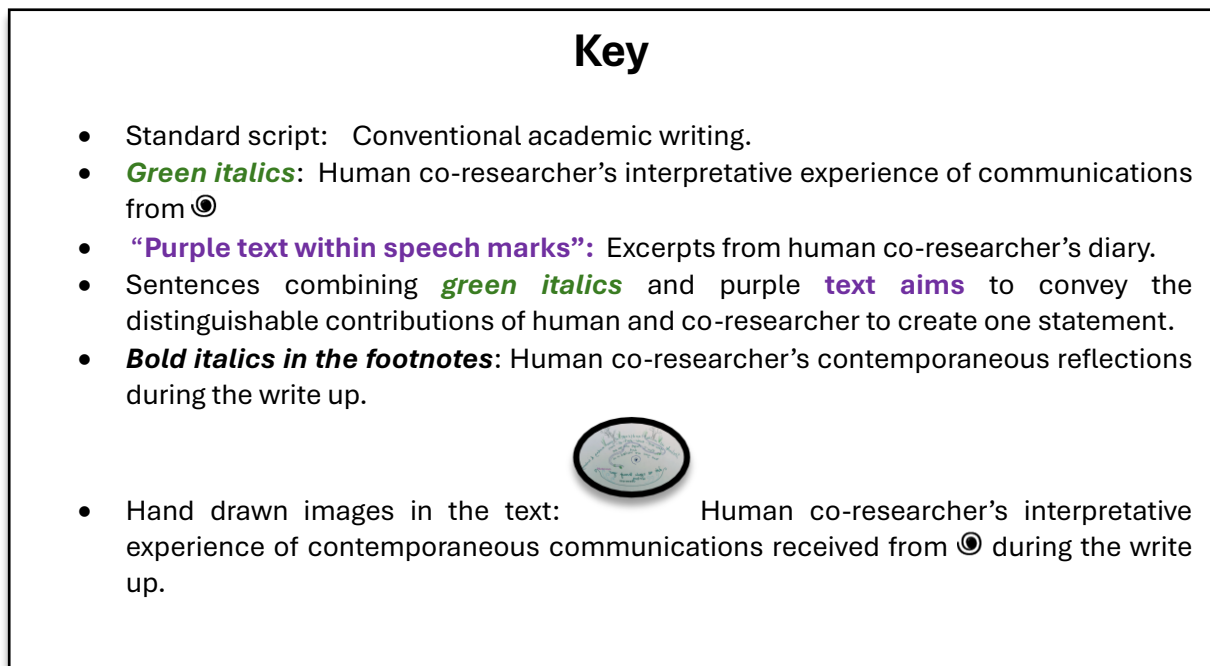


Figure 1
Key

1 INTRODUCTION

Research undertaken by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Ireland indicates that a majority of Irish people believe that climate change is a worrying reality caused at least in part by human activities.¹ The severity of current and projected effects of climate change and its anthropogenic antecedents is substantiated in Ireland by a report issued by the EPA² and

¹ A. Leiserowitz, Carman, J., Rosenthal, S., Neyens, L., Marlon, J., Desmond, M., Smith, S., Rochford, M. F., O'Mahony, J., and Reaper, L., *Climate Change In The Irish Mind*, (New Haven, CT: Yale Program on Climate Change, 2021) [accessed on 24.06.2025 at <<https://www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/climate-change-in-the-irish-mind.php>>], p.2.

² Peter Thorne, Boucher, Jean., Caulfield, Brian, et al., (2023) *Ireland's Climate Change Assessment Synthesis Report*, Johnstown Castle, Co. Wexford, Ireland: Environmental Protection Agency, [Accessed on 24.06.2025 at <https://www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/ICCA_Synthesis_Report.pdf>], p. 2.

internationally by scientists such as Trenberth,³ along with a recent review by Singh and Shindikar of one hundred articles on climate change.⁴ Many authors including Berry, Matthews, McCool et al. and Plumwood argue that the Western dualistic mindset which sets humans apart from nature to be objectified and manipulated accordingly, has significantly contributed to the current ecological crisis, and responses to it.⁵ Scholars such as Kimmerer and Mustonen writing from non-Western indigenous perspectives⁶ and Blackie through a Celtic lens⁷ suggest that indigenous non-dualistic practices, knowledge and beliefs might offer alternative pathways to healing the current ecological devastation. There is a growing movement in Ireland focused on reclaiming indigenous traditions through broadcasting,⁸ educational programmes and collectives,⁹ ecology centres¹⁰ and publications promoting Irish language, folklore and indigenous spirituality as ways of reimagining more attuned relationships with nature.¹¹

³ Kevin E Trenberth, 'Climate Change Caused By Human Activities Is Happening And It Already Has Major Consequences', *Journal of energy & natural resources law* 36.4 (2018), pp. 463-481.

⁴ Abhijeet, E. A. Singh, E. A. and M. R. Shindikar, 'A Comprehensive Review On Climate Change And Its Effects', *International Journal of Environment and Climate Change*, vol. 13, no. 11 (Oct. 2023), pp. 924-31.

⁵ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our way Into The Future* (Crown, 2011), pp. 102-104.

Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self* (London: Routledge 1994), pp.14-20.

Daniel K. McCool, ., and Hardy, Lisa J., 'Human-Nature Resonance In Times Of Social-Ecological Crisis: Toward Healing With The More-than-Human World', *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 13.1 (2023), pp. 48-63, [accessed on 7 May 2025 at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/26395916.2023.2168760>].

Val Plumwood, *Feminism And The Mastery Of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 190-192.

⁶ Robin Wall Kimmerer 'Weaving Traditional Ecological Knowledge Into Biological Education: A Call To Action', *BioScience* 52.5 (2002), p.434.

Tero Mustonen, et al., 'Cross-Chapter Box INDIG: The Role Of Indigenous Knowledge And Local Knowledge In Understanding And Adapting To Climate Change', *ELF In: Schipper, A. Revi, B.L. Preston, E.R. Carr, S.H. Eriksen, L.R. Fernandez-Carril, B. Glavovic, N.J.M. Hilmi, D. Ley, R. Mukerji, M.S. Muylaert de Araujo, R. Perez, S.K. Rose, and P.K. Singh (2022)* [accessed on 28 August 2025 at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362432216_The_Role_of_Indigenous_Knowledge_and_Local_Knowledge_in_Understanding_and_Adapting_to_Climate_Change>].

⁷ Sharon Blackie, *If women rose rooted* (Tewkesbury: September Publishing, 2016), pp 17-19.

⁸ RTE, < <https://about.rte.ie/2024/08/30/rte-launches-new-season-of-unique-public-service-content-featuring-real-irish-stories-and-celebrating-irelands-landscape-culture-and-creativity/>>.

⁹ For example, Scoil Scairte, [accessed 10th June 2025 at < <https://www.thetrailblazery.com/scoilscairte> > and Indigenous Ireland, < <https://indigenous.ie/>>].

¹⁰ For example, An Tairseach < <https://antairseach.ie/>> and Brigit's Garden < <https://brigitsgarden.ie/>>

¹¹ See for example,

Magan, Manchán, *Listen To The Land Speak: A Journey Into The Wisdom Of What Lies Beneath Us* (Gill & Macmillan Ltd, 2022).

Easkey Britton, *Ebb and Flow: How To Connect With The Patterns And Power of Water* (National Geographic Books, 2023).

Anja, Murray, *Wild Embrace: Connecting To The Wonder Of Ireland's Natural World*, (Hatchett Books, Ireland, 2023).

Mercy Sisters Western Provence, *Walking Gently On Earth*, (Mercy Sisters, Western Province, 2016), and

Ní Dochartaigh, Kerri, *Thin places: A natural history of healing and home* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2021)

The research, set in an Irish context, and ambitious in scope, follows two lines of investigation. Firstly, it explores within an Irish context, whether indigenous and alternative perspectives on nature have persisted to a substantial degree. Secondly, drawing on discussions from more-than-human participatory research (MtH-PR),¹² and transpersonal research methods described by Braud and Anderson¹³ it asks how, within an academic framework, the contributions of a particular nature place with which the human researcher is connected might be included as a co-researcher.

The first theme explores the 'Weltanschauung' of a group of people living in the global Northwest with regard to their relationships with particular nature places and with the wider environment. It seeks to uncover whether indigenous worldviews described by writers such as Aikenhead and Ogawa¹⁴, incorporating relational, monistic and place-based ontologies, might exist in a Western setting. It involves an investigation into how a sample of people with interests in the natural environment, most of whom have lived or who are currently living in Ireland describe their relationship with places that they feel connected to, their cultural and spiritual beliefs, and their pro-environmental beliefs and behaviours with reference to the following questions: Firstly, can participants identify nature places they feel connected with and what they value about them? Secondly, how might they experience these places communicating or relating with them at the level of embodied, sensory and sacred awareness?¹⁵ Thirdly, what role do they feel their spiritual and cultural heritage plays in informing their relationship with nature? Fourthly, how would participants describe their pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours, and do they see a link between these and their experiences of connection with nature? Fifthly, how have participants experienced their engagement with the study; did it offer, for example, opportunities for benefits, insights and learnings?

¹² For example, Bastian, Michelle, et al., eds. *Participatory Research In More-Than-Human Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2016).

¹³ William Braud, and Rosemarie Anderson, *Transpersonal Research Methods For The Social Sciences: Honoring Human Experience* (Sage, 1998).

¹⁴ Glen S., Aikenhead and Masakata Ogawa, 'Indigenous Knowledge And Science Revisited', *Cultural Studies of Science Education 2* (2007), pp. 559-560.

¹⁵ This study focuses on participants' reported experiences; epistemological questions about the validity of more-than-human communications are beyond its scope.

The second theme presents a methodological innovation investigating how a MtH-PR design, informed by a transpersonal research orientation might support the exploration of topics pertaining to human communication with nature which Noorani and Brigstocke describe as involving decentring the dominance of human viewpoints, providing practical avenues for amplifying agency of non-humans.¹⁶ MtH-PR as applied in this research is aligned with Braud's exposition of transpersonal research methodologies which extends the bounds of human experience beyond the human self into connection with the wider material and spiritual environment.¹⁷ MtH-PR- is a relatively new and unestablished research methodology in Western academia¹⁸ where the practicalities of "how 'to do the research are often not addressed"¹⁹. This study explores whether it can move from being a 'philosophical field experiment'²⁰ to a practical methodology yielding data in ways mutually beneficial for all those associated with the project – researchers, participants and readers. The aim is to formulate a practical protocol for working with a more-than-human co-researcher which is clearly and critically applied throughout. While mixed methods are applied to data collection, including some interviews, the majority of the data was collected through an online survey, with the focus on participant experience and beliefs.

MtH-PR was chosen as it offers the potential for what Chenail et al describe as coherence between methodology, research question and methods employed,²¹ whose *raison d'être* in this research arises from a meaningful collaboration with a more-than-human co-researcher. This methodology stands in close alignment to the research questions which explore human connection and communication with nature places. The research aims to offer another narrative to the widely cited human disconnect from nature, characteristic of Western

¹⁶ Tehseen Noorani and Julian Brigstocke, *More-Than-Human Participatory Research* (University of Bristol/AHRC Connected Communities Programme, 2018), [accessed online on 22 July 2024], pp. 10-11.

¹⁷ Braud, and Anderson, *Transpersonal Research*.

¹⁸ Bastian, et al., 'Introduction: More Than Human Participatory Research: Contexts, Challenges, Possibilities', in Bastian, Michelle, et al., eds., *Participatory Research*, pp. 2-20.

¹⁹ Séverine, Van Bommel and Susan Boonman-Berson, 'Transforming Convivial Conservation: Towards More-Than-Human Participation In Research', *Conservation and Society*, 20 (2022), 139.

²⁰ Ibid, p.20

²¹ Ronald J. Chenail, et al., 'Facilitating Coherence Across Qualitative Research Papers', *Qualitative Report*, 16.1 (2011), pp. 263–75.

modernist cosmologies.²² It seeks evidence for the presence of alternative cosmologies and behaviours in Western settings which evoke human experiences of self as relational and embedded in the wider self of the environment. Eisenstein and others have suggested that a sense of interconnectedness with nature guides humans towards a desire to love and protect the environment.²³ This study makes the important shift of inviting a more-than-human entity to participate as co-researcher to guide hypotheses and inspire explorations of substantive issues using established social science methods. I have not been able to access any research studies in the literature documenting in a systematic way, the engagement of more-than-human co-researchers as generators of hypotheses. In addition, most of the academic studies I consulted concerned projects involving animals rather than plants. This current study aims to add to the body of research regarding the practical use of MtH-PR with a meadow/woodland co-researcher. If this cosmology of interbeing with nature is to be taken seriously, the way we engage at a personal and systemic level with the wider environment should include the interests of the more-than-human community. This extends to academic research and how we consider the interests of the more-than-human others who may be direct and more often, indirect stakeholders in research that is about them or that exploits environmental resources to conduct it.

Through its methodology, this study seeks to offer balance to the Western emphasis on valid knowledge as pertaining mainly to scientific knowledge, by exploring the contribution that traditional indigenous epistemologies can offer in expanding what counts as legitimate knowledge. As scholars such as Kimmerer, Ní Cassaithe and Kavanagh, and Aikenhead and Ogawa, have argued, indigenous ways of knowing, or traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) are recognised as having equal status with scientific knowledge and arise from attentive and

²² For example, see Pierre, St Louise, 'Design and Nature: A History' in Fletcher, K., St. Pierre, L., & Tham, M. (Eds), *Design and Nature: A Partnership* (Routledge, 2019), pp. 92-108, and Plumwood, *Feminism* p.2 and

Matthew J Zylstra et al., 'Connectedness As A Core Conservation Concern: An Interdisciplinary Review Of Theory And A Call For Practice', *Springer Science Reviews* 2.1 (2014), pp.119-120.

²³ Charles Eisenstein, *Climate: A New Story* (North Atlantic Books, 2018).

Joanna Macy, *World As Self, World As Lover: Courage And Global Justice And Ecological Renewal* (Berkeley CA: Parallax Press, 2007).

Arne Naess, 'Self-Realisation: An Ecological Approach To Being In The World' in Fleming, Pat, et al., *Thinking Like A Mountain: Towards A Council Of All Beings* New Catalyst Books edition, 2007) (originally published 1988), pp 19-30.

intimate relationship to a local environment embedded in cultural values, beliefs, local languages and practices.²⁴

Having presented the context for the research, its rationale, aims and questions, the next section will present an overview of existing literature contextualising the current study, and beginning with defining two key terms. This will be followed by an outline of the methodology with the proceeding section presenting and analysing the results. In the final section, a critical analysis is presented of the main research findings, including the experimental use of the more-than-human participatory methodology and concludes with an appraisal of the main contribution of this study and its implications.

²⁴ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Weaving*, and Ní Cassaithe and Kavanagh, *Using Indigenous* and Aikenhead and Ogawa, *Indigenous Knowledge*.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 DEFINING TWO KEY CONCEPTS

Indigenous: Friedman²⁵ and Johnson²⁶ suggest that the term indigenous is an often contested concept. The UN permanent forum on indigenous issues, for example, resists offering a definition for indigenous peoples, suggesting instead characteristics such as self-identification, historical continuity to precolonial ways of life and strong links to territories surrounding resources.²⁷ Ingold on the other hand, challenges such viewpoints which he classifies as following a *genealogical* model of indigeneity rooted in ancestral lineage and territory. He proposes instead a *relational* model embedded in a phenomenological framework whereby a person is continually coming into being through active engagement with the land and its inhabitants.²⁸ He describes indigeneity as a process in which ‘...both cultural knowledge and bodily substance are seen to undergo continuous generation in the context of an ongoing engagement with the land and with the beings – human and non-human – that dwell therein.’²⁹ From a cultural viewpoint, writers such as Aikenhead and Ogawa,³⁰ Hart³¹, Kovach³² and others³³ suggest that indigenous worldviews are associated with monistic ontologies, where matter/mind and sacredness are one reality arising out of an animistic philosophy of the world, experienced as intrinsically relational, place-based and carrying ethical responsibilities for the

²⁵ J. Friedman, ‘Indigeneity: Anthropological Notes On A Historical Variable’, in Minde, Henry, ed. *Indigenous Peoples: Self-determination, Knowledge, Indigeneity*, (Netherlands: Eburon Uitgeverij BV, 2008), pp 29-48.

²⁶ Miranda Johnson, ‘Indigeneity: Making And Contesting The Concept’, *The Routledge Handbook of Law and Society*, (Routledge, 2021), pp 166-169.

²⁷ United Nations Permanent Forum On Indigenous Issues, *Who Are Indigenous Peoples?*, Fact Sheet No. 1 (New York: United Nations, 2015) http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf [accessed 25 June 2025].

²⁸ Ingold, Tim, *The Perception Of The Environment: Essays On Livelihood, Dwelling And Skill* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp 132-133.

²⁹ Ibid p.133.

³⁰ Aikenhead, and Ogawa, *Indigenous Knowledge*, pp. 539–620.

³¹ Michael A., Hart, ‘Indigenous Worldviews, Knowledge, And Research: The Development Of An Indigenous Research Paradigm’, *Journal of Indigenous Social Development*, 1.1A (2010).

³² Margaret Kovach *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, And Contexts* (University of Toronto press, 2021), P. 35.

³³ Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Fernwood publishing, 2020). Bernadette, Flanagan, and Michael O'Sullivan, ‘Spirituality In Contemporary Ireland: Manifesting Indigeneity’, *Spiritus: A Journal Of Christian Spirituality* 16.3 (2016), pp. 55-73.

other more-than-human kinship relations of place. Harvey views animism ‘...as being concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons.’³⁴ He places emphasis in animism on the personhood ascribed both to humans and more-than-humans, which comprehends all as subjects rather than objects with consequences for promoting ethical behaviour.³⁵ Ní Cassaithe et al describe these cosmologies as encouraging spiritually imbued relationships of respect and care towards nature³⁶ with Harvey pointing also to their characteristics of relational reciprocity.³⁷ Broadly following Ingold’s *relational* approach but incorporating elements from research into indigenous worldviews, I will refer to term *indigenous* as a process of dwelling and knowing, rooted in embodied experiences of intertwined relationships with place and its more-than-human habitants involving reciprocal ethical responsibilities, arising out of a lived cultural history and a sacred/mythical consciousness.

The more-than-human co-researcher in this study will be identified as ☉. I refer to them not as a separate entity, but rather from an indigenous relational perspective where I am indivisibly part of this nature place with whom I inhabit. I concur with Merleau-Ponty in his contemplation of the sky, that I am ‘...not an acosmic subject standing before it, I do not possess it in thought...[r]ather, I abandon myself to it, I plunge into this mystery, and it “thinks itself in me.”’³⁸ The process of discerning the way ☉ wanted to be represented unfolded over time including during a previous unpublished research project³⁹ and emerged though my imagination as this wordless symbol ☉. ‘They’ (multigendered-multifaceted) can be encountered as an acre of

³⁴ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting The Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. xvii.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. xx.

³⁶ Ní Cassaithe and Kavanagh, *Using Indigenous*.

³⁷ Harvey, *Animism*, pp 12-13.

³⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology Of Perception*, trans. by Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), [accessed on 29th June 2025 at <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgiclfefindmkaj/https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e265eb50aee2d7e8a81ae69/t/614a0d939e6cdc02ebf22112/1632243096452/Merleau-Ponty-M-Phenomenology-of-Perception.pdf>] p. 222.

³⁹ Imogen O'Connor, *The Place Speaks: What Happened When The Stones Told Me To Plant Trees? Exploring The Sacred, In Dialogue With An Acre Of Land In North County Sligo*, (2024). This is an un-published research project undertaken as an assignment within the Ecology and spirituality master’s programme, University of Wales, Trinity Saint David. It can be accessed at https://1drv.ms/b/c/4edd031c0b6d1878/EXgYbQscA90ggE7swQAAAAABueXYByVI9bnp_klnGK_h6A

land in Co. Sligo, Ireland.⁴⁰ The land enfolds the remains of a megalithic tomb and ring barrow,⁴¹ with woodland, ponds, wildflower meadow and sitting spaces. (Figure 2,3)



Figure 2
Megalithic remains, wind, birds and woodland of ☺

⁴⁰ Diary entry 29.01.2025: ‘...contemplating on the methodology section which I am in the process of writing, I have a thought that by now I know arises out of my expanded ☺/imogen mind. It goes thus: *This thesis is not always going to be written or read in a coherent, liner fashion. Allow the reader to be confused - the explanation may come later. Just as we-work-together, not all is revealed completely or sequentially to Imogen.*

⁴¹ This can be viewed at Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, *The Historic Environment Viewer*, < <https://www.archaeology.ie/archaeological-survey-ireland/historic-environment-viewer-application>>by inputting Carrigeens, Carrigeens (Ballinfull), Sligo, IRL. The reference, SL007-040002- is visible on the map.



Figure 3
Aerial map of co-researcher showing megalithic remains (in red)

2.2 CONTRADICTIONS IN THE WESTERN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION REGARDING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN HUMANS AND NATURE

Western dualistic ontology has foundations in the seventeenth century philosophical writings of Descartes, who posited rational analysis as the proper method to ascertain the meaning of natural processes,⁴² and, as Sheldrake points out, to the new emerging science espoused by Isaac Newton who theorised that matter could be broken down into discrete, objectifiable measurable units whose activities could be predicted.⁴³ However, this same Western tradition also seeded alternative ontologies and epistemologies, with Ingold suggesting that much of the criticism for Western thought originates from the Western tradition.⁴⁴ Abram suggests that for Spinoza (a younger contemporary of Descartes), mind and body were not two separable substances, but different manifestations of the same substance and every material body had its mental aspect: matter was ensouled.⁴⁵ There are also strong counter arguments from within

⁴² René Descartes, *Discourse On Method And Related Writings* (Penguin, 2000).

⁴³ Rupert Sheldrake, *Science And Spiritual Practices: Transformative Experiences And Their Effects On Our Bodies, Brains, And Health* (London: Coronet, 2017), p.87.

⁴⁴ Ingold, *The Perception*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), p. 107.

the Western sciences challenging the supremacy of this dualistic ontology, with its promise of scientific empirical objectivity. For example, in her presentation of a metaphysical discussion of monism, Mathews cites Heisenberg's findings from a quantum physics perspective that observation affects what is being observed so that '[t]he observer...is integral to what is observed'⁴⁶. In addition, Braud, referring to Western transpersonal methodologies⁴⁷ and Wilson⁴⁸, to indigenous research, articulate similar understandings of what counts as valid knowledge. These include knowledge that is contextual, embedded in relations, carrying ethical obligations where the researcher is also a participant, and the research itself is participatory and ethically committed.⁴⁹

Phenomenology, introduced by Husserl, developed by Merleau-Ponty⁵⁰ and integrated by Abram offers a lens through which to view human experience as intersubjective and embodied,⁵¹ and embedded in landscape and place.⁵² Central to Husserl's approach was the notion of returning '...to the things themselves'⁵³. He sought not to explain 'reality' or what we know but rather how we know: how our environment makes itself known through our awareness. He saw the human body as the subjective instrument for experiencing through an associative empathy, the bodies of other experiencing subjects,⁵⁴ using the word *intersubjectivity* to describe this process of reciprocal perception.⁵⁵ The phenomenal field '...was now seen to be inhabited by multiple subjectivities... a collective landscape, constituted by other experiencing subjects as well as by oneself'.⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty developed this thinking further, locating the body as the seat of awareness, which creates a living bond with the world where subject/consciousness and object/nature are dialectically related moments of one totality expressed through being-in-

⁴⁶ Mathews, *The Ecological*, p.55.

⁴⁷ Braud, and Anderson, *Transpersonal Research*).

⁴⁸ Wilson, *Research*, pp 55-56.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.44.

⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*.

⁵¹ David Abram, *The Spell Of The Senuous: Perception and Language In A More-than-Human World* (Vintage Books 2012), pp. 31-72.

⁵² Christopher Tilley, 'Space, Place, Landscape And Perception: Phenomenological Perspectives', in Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* Vol 10 (Oxford: Berg, 1994), pp. 7-34.

⁵³ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. by J. N. Findlay, Vol 2 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 168.

⁵⁴ Abram, *The Spell*, p. 35.

⁵⁵ Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes Of The Sacred: Geography And Narrative In American Spirituality* (JHU Press, 2002), p.53.

⁵⁶ Abram, *The Spell*, p.37.

body-in-the-world.⁵⁷ Embodied experiences occur through a variety of means: perception/senses, bodily movement, emotion and mental processes involving belief systems, decision-making and memories.⁵⁸ Research suggests that the more aware a person is of the connection between their bodily sensations and emotions, the more likely they are to be able to bond with nature.⁵⁹ Tilley articulates, how intersubjective worlds are co-created in the landscapes that people inhabit:

*A landscape has ontological import because it is lived in and through, mediated, worked on and altered, replete with cultural meaning and symbolism...The place acts dialectically so as to create the people who are of that place.*⁶⁰

Similarly, the native language of a place can express this co-creativity and belonging. Magan explores how the Irish language is deeply connected with the landscape it arose from.⁶¹

Weber saw the Western scientific mindset as initiating a process of human disenchantment with the world,⁶² and Curry suggests that 'Modernity and enchantment ... are related as immiscible antinomies. Like oil and water, they do not and cannot mix...' ⁶³ He highlights the importance of encouraging and creating the conditions for enchantment to flourish in modernist cultures.⁶⁴ There is another viewpoint, however, suggesting that enchantment has never been lost and continues to thrive in Western society.⁶⁵ Otto described the ubiquitous human experience of the numinous, as an encounter with something wholly other, both in terms of the wonder and awe and the experience of its terrifying power. ⁶⁶ Taylor has explored how

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 14

⁵⁸ Tilley p. 12.

⁵⁹ Lindsay Branham, 'Embodied earth kinship: interoceptive awareness and relational attachment personal factors predict nature connectedness in a structural model of nature connection', *Frontiers in Psychology* 15 (2024), 1400655.

⁶⁰ Tilley, *Space, Place*, p.26.

⁶¹ Manchán Magan, *Thirty-two Words For Field: Lost words Of The Irish landscape* (Bonnie Books UK, 2024).

⁶² Max Weber, *Essays In Sociology* (H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, trans. and ed., (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1948), p.139.

⁶³ Patrick Curry, 'Enchantment And Modernity', *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature* 9 (2012), p.81.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 86.

⁶⁵ Lori G Beaman, 'Reclaiming Enchantment: The Transformational Possibilities Of Immanence', *Secularism And Nonreligion* 10.1 (2021), p.2.

⁶⁶ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea Of The Holy: An Inquiry Into The Non-Rational Factor In the Idea Of The Divine And Its Relation To The Rational*, trans. by John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923; repr. 1958), [accessed online 13 May 2025], pp 11-41.

philosophers, environmentalists and popular culture in Western settings, have portrayed the emotional and spiritual connection to nature in ways that resemble a 'dark green religion', based on a deep spiritual connection with nature and sense of interdependence and kinship with the rest of life.⁶⁷ Lane in his analysis of sacred landscapes presents four axioms for guiding contemporary explorations of sacred place: Firstly, '*...sacred place is not chosen, it chooses.*' Secondly, '*...sacred place is ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary.*' Thirdly, '*...sacred place can be tread[sic] upon without being entered.*' Fourthly, '*...the impulse of sacred place is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal.*'⁶⁸ Finally, shamanistic encounters with flora have been referred to in Western settings most notably by Gagliano, a plant biologist who has recounted experiences of plants offering useful guidance to her scientific research into plant behaviour.⁶⁹

In the Western tradition, environmental ethics has opened the debate concerning the extension of intrinsic value and moral consideration, previously centred on anthropocentric rights, to other-than-human entities, not only to animals, but also to plants and sometimes ecosystems.⁷⁰ As such it bears similarities to the ethical responsibilities inherent in indigenous traditions.⁷¹ Depth ecologists such as Leopold⁷² Naess⁷³ Macy⁷⁴ and Seed⁷⁵ encourage the development of an ecological self which embraces all life forms,⁷⁶ so as to relate with the world

⁶⁷ Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (University of California Press, 2009), p.13.

⁶⁸ Lane *Landscapes*, p. 19.

⁶⁹ Monica Gagliano, *Thus Spoke The Plant: A Remarkable Journey Of Groundbreaking Scientific Discoveries And Personal Encounters With Plants*, (North Atlantic Books, 2018).

⁷⁰ For discussions of this see Robin Attfield, *Environmental Ethics: An Overview For The Twenty-First Century*, 2nd edn fully revised and expanded (Cambridge, UK Polity, 2014), p.36 and Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

⁷¹ Wolfgang Kapfhammer, 'Amazonian Pain. Indigenous ontologies And Western Eco-Spirituality', *Indiana* 29 (2012), pp. 145-169.

⁷² Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here And There*, (UK: Penguin classics, 2020 [originally published 1949]), pp.156-157.

⁷³ Arnie Naess, 'The Deep Ecology Movement, Some Philosophical Aspects', in Miller, G. T, and Spoolman, S. eds, *Living In The Environment: Principles, Connections, And Solutions*, ed by Miller, G. T, and Spoolman, S. (Cengage Learning, 2011), p. 413, and

Arne Naess, 'Self Realization' in Fleming, Pat, et al., *Thinking Like A Mountain: Towards A Council Of All Beings* (New Catalyst Books edition, 2007) (originally published 1988), pp. 19-30.

⁷⁴ Macy, *World As Self*, pp. 27-29.

⁷⁵ John Seed, 'Beyond Anthropocentrism' in Fleming, *Thinking like a mountain*, pp. 35-40.

⁷⁶ Pat Fleming, et al., *Thinking Like A Mountain: Towards A Council Of All Beings*, (New Catalyst Books edition, 2007).

as a life-giving lover or partner.⁷⁷ There has been a growing interest in granting legal rights to natural entities such as rivers in ways that recognise, in Western legal systems, the validity of indigenous non-Western traditions.⁷⁸

2.3 THE IRISH CONTEXT

Ireland, an island on the Western extremity of the European continent, and an independent nation for the last century has evolved out of its prehistoric past, evident in the rich distribution of archaeological remains, and its history of successive invasions by the Celts, Vikings and the Normans. In the sixteenth century it became a 'kingdom' under British rule, and in the seventeenth century, the implementation of the penal laws imposed legal, religious and cultural restrictions upon the indigenous Catholic population and Protestant dissenters.⁷⁹ Some form of Irish national consciousness had already emerged by the first century AD based on a common Celtic cosmology, kinship, value system and native language.⁸⁰ The late nineteenth/early twentieth century Celtic revival cultural movement, a reaction to British colonial cultural dominance, formed part of the attempt of nationalists to strengthen a national identity through the reclamation and rediscovery of the Irish heritage.⁸¹

The Celtic tradition in Ireland as described by Whelan⁸² has a cosmology similar to other indigenous traditions. She identifies five features of Celtic consciousness: Its monistic cosmology, its animistic character, ethical responsibilities of living in right relationship with the earth, the seasonal, cyclical nature of time, and finally, the importance of story, mythology and ritual. Blackie, views a sense belonging to place as a central aspect of the Celtic identity which

⁷⁷ Macy, *World As Self*, p. 32.

⁷⁸ Lidia Cano Pecharroman, 'Rights Of Nature: Rivers That Can Stand In Court', *Resources* 7.1 (2018), 13.
Joshua C Gellers, 'Earth System Law And The Legal Status Of Non-Humans In The Anthropocene', *Earth System Governance* 7 (2021), 100083.

⁷⁹ For access to a comprehensive bibliography on Irish history, see *Irish History Online*, Royal Irish Academy, <https://www.ria.ie/library/irish-history-online/> [accessed 18.05.2025].

⁸⁰ James P Mallory, *The Origins Of The Irish*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 2013), pp. 292-296.

⁸¹ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature Of The Modern Nation* (Random House, 1996).

Joseph Theodor Leerssen *Remembrance And Imagination. Patterns In The Historical And Literary Presentation Of Ireland In The Nineteenth Century* (Cork university press, 1996).

⁸² Dolores T Whelan, *Ever Ancient Ever New: Celtic Spirituality In The 21st Century* (Dublin: Original Writing Ltd, 2010), pp. 9-19.

arises out of the common landscape and environment.⁸³ Celtic relational ontology was reflected historically in the Irish legal system of Brehon Laws which included prescriptions for the treatment not only of people but for water, animals trees and bees,⁸⁴ and in ancient Irish kingship rites or *Bainis Rí* which included a ceremonial marriage by the king with the goddess of the land to ensure her protection.⁸⁵ The arrival of Christianity in Ireland in the sixth century began a process of assimilating the older Celtic pagan traditions and their sacred sites into Christian practices and places of worship.⁸⁶ However, there is evidence to suggest that these sacred places accommodate pre-Christian spiritualities along with the Christian overlay.⁸⁷

2.4 RESEARCH INTO NATURE CONNECTEDNESS

Articles by Whitburn, and Gilford and Nilsson reveal the expanding research on the relationship between nature-connectedness, attunement to nature and pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours, and how culture and cultural worldviews influence pro-environmental concern and behaviour.⁸⁸ While Bell et al present a review in relation to sensory engagements with nature found in therapeutic landscapes literature,⁸⁹ ethnographic studies exploring how people in Western settings describe their embodied sensory, emotional and spiritual experiences of nature are harder to locate, with none that I could find in the Irish setting. However, other research in Irish settings has begun to emerge pointing to the importance of sensory and emotional connection with nature for health, wellbeing and enhanced learning opportunities,⁹⁰

⁸³ Blackie, *If Women*, pp13-14.

⁸⁴ Tina R Fields, 'Trees In Early Irish law And Lore: Respect For Other-Than-Human Life In Europe's History', *Ecopsychology* 12.2 (2020), p.131.

⁸⁵ Blackie, *If Women*, p.59 and

Seán Ó Duinn, *Where Three Streams Meet: Celtic Spirituality*, (Dublin, Columba Press, 2000), pp. 44-45.

⁸⁶ Lorcan Harney, 'Christianising Pagan Worlds In Conversion-Era Ireland: Archaeological Evidence For The Origins Of Irish Ecclesiastical Sites', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* 117.1 (2017), pp. 103-130.

⁸⁷ Suzanne O'Brien, J. Crawford, 'Well, Water, Rock: Holy Wells, Mass Rocks And Reconciling Identity In The Republic Of Ireland', *Material Religion* 4.3 (2008), pp. 326-348.

⁸⁸ Julie Whitburn, et al., 'Meta-Analysis Of Human Connection To nature And Proenvironmental Behavior', *Conservation Biology* 34.1 (2020), pp. 180-193.

Robert Gifford and Andreas Nilsson, 'Personal And Social Factors That Influence Pro-Environmental Concern and Behaviour: A Review', *International Journal Of Psychology* 49.3 (2014), pp. 141-157.

⁸⁹ Sarah L Bell, Clare Hickman, and Frank Houghton. 'From Therapeutic Landscape to Therapeutic 'Sensescape' Experiences With Nature? A Scoping Review', *Wellbeing, Space And Society* 4 (2023).

⁹⁰ See Caitriona Carlin et al *Nature And Environment To Attain And Restore Health* (prepared by the NEAR Health project team, NUI Galway- Environmental Protection Agency Report No. 348, 2020), Joan Whelan, and Orla Kelly, 'Experiential, Relational, Playful Pedagogy In Irish Primary Schools—Possibilities Offered By Forest School', *Irish Educational Studies* 43.4 (2024), 1363-1387.

with one study exploring how human encounters with megalithic sites facilitated a sense of connection with nature, cultural heritage and the sacred.^{91 92}



Figure 4
“We are alive” - ©’s contribution to the literature review

⁹¹ Paul M White, *Discovering Meaning In Ireland: Megalithic Spiritual Experiences* (Doctoral dissertation, Saybrook University, 2020). [accessed on 04.05.2025 at < <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2494303628>>].

⁹² ***As I near the end of writing the literature review, I decide to spend fifteen minutes in meditation outside to see if there is any contribution that © would like to make. The wind picks up and I video record the event. I feel the somatic aliveness of the interaction between the wind, the trees and myself and a felt sense of the importance of reminding the reader of the context of this research.***

3 METHODOLOGY

This section begins with an overview of the MtH-PR/transpersonal framework central to this study, followed by a section on reflexivity and ethics, and concluding with a presentation of the methods and how they were applied.

3.1 MORE-THAN-HUMAN PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Noorani and Brigstocke describe more-than-human methodologies as ones ‘...that invite non-humans to participate actively in the research process, or that find ways of identifying and amplifying the role of non-human agency in the construction of research practices.’⁹³ These methodologies which Bastian views as still at an exploratory stage of development,⁹⁴ are grounded in ontologies which question the bounded nature of the human self, presenting instead ‘...an ecological picture of social worlds ...in which humans are always constituted through diverse webs of non-human life.’⁹⁵ MtH-PR builds on traditional participatory research, which engages human communities in identifying and responding to issues that matter to them, and extends this approach to more-than-human communities.⁹⁶ This is facilitated by breaking down boundaries between researched and researcher and working in partnership in ways that attend to broader issues of ethics, power and what counts as knowledge.⁹⁷

Noorani et al identify three perspectives within MtH-PR: those emphasising socio-technical relations, those emphasising experience beyond the human and those emphasizing more-than human communication.⁹⁸ The first approach grounds MtH-PR in an acknowledgement of the presence systemic inequalities, colonial legacies of unequal power relations, a favouring of Western rationality and a devaluing and ridiculing of indigenous peoples and their ‘ontologies of

⁹³ Noorani and Brigstocke, *More-Than-Human*.

⁹⁴ Bastian et al, ‘Introduction’, *Participatory Research* p. 20.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p.10.

⁹⁶ Noorani and Brigstock, *More-Than-Human*, p.48.

⁹⁷ Bastian et al., ‘Introduction’, *Participatory Research*, p.19.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*., p.20.

more-than-human entanglements'.⁹⁹ The second perspective focuses on phenomenological experiences. The third approach locates itself in multi-species communication studies often involving ethnographic studies with indigenous peoples. The methodological approach applied here draws on aspects of all three approaches. Firstly, the research questions and methods expand reliance on scientific knowledge to include ways of knowing associated with indigenous cultures,¹⁰⁰ involving the more-than-human co-researcher in co-creating the research at every stage of the process. Secondly, the methodology is grounded in a phenomenological approach where the human co-researcher's embodied awareness itself becomes a research 'instrument'. Thirdly, the human co-researcher is alert to embodied communications from a more-than-human seen as imbued with agency and personhood.

I have included discussions on transpersonal methodologies for two reasons: their emphasis on transformation, and their explorations of expanded states of human consciousness. Braud and Anderson describe transpersonal approaches as participatory activities whose ultimate inclination is towards personal and social transformation, where '...researcher, participants, and audience eventually work together...' in the creation of new insights which can continue on in the lives of the readers long after the enquiry has ended.¹⁰¹ Braud identifies dreams, images, synchronicities and contemplation as examples of expanded consciousness states in human subjects.¹⁰²

3.2 REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity was vital to this research given the centrality of self as an embodied instrument for communicating with ☉ and in working directly with human participants. Following Findlay¹⁰³ and Berger's¹⁰⁴ discussions, my attention to reflexivity was conducted at every stage of the

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.11.

¹⁰⁰ Robby Zidny, Jesper Sjöström, and Ingo Eilks, 'A Multi-Perspective Reflection On How Indigenous Knowledge And Related Ideas Can Improve Science Education For Sustainability', *Science & Education* 29.1 (2020), p.156.

¹⁰¹ Braud, and Anderson, *Transpersonal*, p.87.

¹⁰² William Braud, 'An Introduction To Organic Inquiry: Honoring The Transpersonal And Spiritual In Research Praxis', *Journal Of Transpersonal Psychology* 36.1 (2004), pp. 4-16.

¹⁰³ Linda Finlay, "'Outing" The Researcher: The Provenance, Process, And Practice Of Reflexivity', *Qualitative Health Research*, 12.4 (2002), p.532.

¹⁰⁴ Roni Berger, 'Now I See It, Now I Don't: Researcher's Position And Reflexivity In Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Research* 15.2 (2015), pp. 1-16, and

research by engaging in a practice of self-awareness and conscious scrutiny of subjective responses, including dynamics between researcher and participants, and the research process itself, so as to contribute to its quality and ethical robustness. It was also essential in attending to power differentials,¹⁰⁵ particularly regarding the more-than-human co-researcher's vulnerability to objectification and misinterpretation, but also to maintaining the ethical requirements with the human participants. It is notable that while reflexivity is seen as crucial in qualitative research,¹⁰⁶ Finlay highlights restrictions imposed by publishers and academia which impede attempts to adequately document the reflexive process applied.¹⁰⁷ To illustrate the rigorous adherence to reflexivity in this research while attending to word restrictions, evidence of reflexivity will be footnoted, except where integral to the discussion.¹⁰⁸



Figure 5

Contemporaneous communication 30.06.2025

Finlay (2002), p.534.

¹⁰⁶ Brendan Gough, 'Reflexivity In Qualitative Psychological Research', *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12.3 (2017), pp. 311-312.

¹⁰⁷ Finlay, "Outing", p.543.

¹⁰⁸ ***As I near the end of editing my first draft, and worrying about the expanding word count, I remember that it is just not up to me to cut out pieces of the text in order to keep within the wordcount. What would ☺ want to retain or edit out? It shocks me to think that I nearly forgot to ask. I go outside in the rain to do my run and ask this question – what is important for ☺ to keep in the text? I am struck after a while by the verdant growth and by a knowing communicated by ☺ that to cut the branches and leaves is cutting off their potential for nourishment.*** (Research log entry 30.06.2025).

Berger¹⁰⁹ identified three checks and balances in the reflexive process which were applied in this research: *the use of a log*,¹¹⁰ (begun the moment the idea for the research was seeded on 27.01.2024) *repeated review*, (in this case, with ☺), and *seeking peer consultation and feedback* (with my supervisor and personal contacts who have academic positions in the social sciences). In the literature referenced in this study pertaining to reflexivity, the role of the supervisor in shaping the research was not alluded to. In this project, the supervisor's feedback shaped the inclusion of interviews and guided the organisation of the research, particularly by emphasising ethics and reflexivity in the methodology.

In discussing the strengths and challenges of my own positionality I follow Langdrige in distinguishing between personal and functional reflexivity.¹¹¹ The reader is invited to pause and attend to the following reflexive footnote.¹¹²

Personal reflexivity refers to how my own worldview, personal experiences, interests and demographic characteristics influence the research. Borrowing terms from a participant in indigenous research methodologies, I identify myself as coming from the three I's – indigenous, invader and immigrant.¹¹³ I am of Irish/English heritage and have a lived experience and ancestral history of being identified both with the coloniser and the colonised. I grew up initially in the UK, then in Ireland as a Roman Catholic but now hold a spirituality rooted in shamanic practice and in the Christian mystic, and Buddhist traditions. I am aware of my own indigenous entanglement with ☺. At the same time, my English origins have brought with them a sense of estrangement from Irish language and culture, and a desire for reconnection to the cultural underpinnings of my emplaced dwelling. I have found the framework of new animism helpful in

¹⁰⁹ Berger, 'Now I See It', p.4

¹¹⁰ Imogen O'Connor, *Research log diary* (2024-2025), can be accessed through the following link: [Research Log.diary Imogen OConnor.docx](#).

¹¹¹ Darren Langdrige, *Phenomenological Psychology: Theory, Research And Method* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2018), referring to Wilkinson's typology, p 60.

¹¹² ***I realise that I am about to write about my positionality without conferring with my co-researcher, ☺. Viewing a previous draft for this section, I realise that I had already consulted them about this and recorded same in my diary but had momentarily forgotten.*** The diary entry reads: "**As part of my ongoing collaboration with ☺, I asked as I began writing this section if they had anything to contribute.** [the interaction took place outside] **As I listened, I experienced" a sense of deep inner silence, that sounded like the wind – just that. ... I offer this as their contribution"**.

¹¹³ Wilson, *Research*, p. 68.

encouraging me to behave towards the wider environment as if it is imbued with personhood, enabling me to relate with persons of place to a depth which makes it possible to engage with ☉ as a co-researcher. I recognise the privilege of living in rural Ireland where there is a strong cultural and spiritual tradition of connection with nature. My career in body-oriented psychodynamic psychotherapy has cultivated skills of both embodied attunement and critical self-awareness. This offers some advantage in attempting to distinguish the lifeworld and experience of the subject from the needs and assumptions of the observing subject.¹¹⁴

Functional reflexivity refers to the influence of the researcher's role and the nature of their relationship with the participants including issues relating to being insider or outsider.¹¹⁵ In relation to the more-than-human co-researcher, I am both insider and outsider. As an insider, my association with ☉ dates from 2001 when they were purchased by my family and where I have lived since 2007. My co-creative relationship which I have described in a previous unpublished research project began as a result of a shamanic journey which directed me to work to re-establish the biodiversity of ☉ through planting of trees/wildflowers and digging ponds.¹¹⁶ Figure 6 illustrates the progression of this co-creative process. At the same time, I was taught and nurtured by them in countless ways that feels akin to love. Without reflexivity, such a close relationship could lead to a blurring of boundaries and making projective assumptions about ☉ and their communications.¹¹⁷ At the same time, I am also an outsider because this non-linguaged way of communicating with more-than-human persons has not been part of my experience, requiring me to struggle to comprehend and to trust the validity of my comprehensions.

¹¹⁴ Berger 'Now I See It', p. 2.

¹¹⁵ Andrew Holmes, Gary Darwin, 'Researcher Positionality—A Consideration Of Its Influence And Place In Qualitative Research—A New Researcher Guide', *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 8.4 (2020), pp. 1–10.

¹¹⁶ O'Connor, *The Place Speaks* (2024).

¹¹⁷ Berger 'Now I See It', p.6.



Figure 6
Co-creating biodiversity from 2010-2025

Regarding the human participants, I am an insider with some and an outsider to others. I drew on populations known through their contact with my eco-psychotherapy practice, with me personally, or through gatekeepers known to me who forwarded the survey to populations potentially unknown to me. Potential conflict through personal association was in part, counterbalanced by anonymising the survey, and making further participation in interviews optional.

3.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical issues generally were addressed during all phases of the research through an ongoing process of reflexivity

3.3.1 Ethics and MtH-PR

There are several ethical and related epistemological and practical challenges directly pertinent to applying MtH-PR including issues of consent, interpretation and representation. Ethical dilemmas concern questions about inherent power imbalances between humans and more-than-human participants and concerns about how more-than-humans give their consent.¹¹⁸ Noorani and Brigstock suggest that most discussions of ethics, empowerment and participation in research are almost entirely anthropocentric. and point to the dangers of anthropomorphic

¹¹⁸ Brigstocke Research (2018).

projection of interests and experiences onto more-than-human entities and collectives.¹¹⁹ Issues of consent were directly addressed in this study firstly by including these in the University of Wales application for ethical approval. While the standard form was limited to issues pertaining to sentient animals, I included the interests of the more-than-human co-researcher in the application.¹²⁰ Secondly, while the research questions relevant to the beliefs and behaviours of humans in relation to their own places of attachment would not seem at first to be directly beneficial or of interest to ☉, I addressed this with them, and the following was their response. as mediated through my own experience.

*We call you here because you belong, we do not separate the research from you, or the wind from the research: we help you ... because it is important to you and thus to us. We are glad you want to hear the deeper knowing that flows between us. It is not a knowing that we have as separate to you. It is known in us and through you.*¹²¹

This response is congruent with Gagliano's experience of plants as generous beings who are seeking to help humans become more conscious of the world around them.¹²²

There are also questions about the extent to which humans can read correctly, communications from the more-than-human environment and the degree to which more-than-humans can ever fully participate in human research.¹²³ I addressed this by developing a six-staged protocol for communicating with my co-researcher, which developed out of prior intense engagement with ☉ as part of an autoethnographic project undertaken in 2024,¹²⁴ (*How we live*

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p.29.

¹²⁰ Completed Ethics Application Form which includes consideration of the more-than-human co-researcher (highlighted in yellow):

<https://1drv.ms/w/c/4edd031c0b6d1878/EXgYbQscA90ggE4YxwAAAAABbK_noMBCu6r8nLidzvoUPw>

¹²¹ Diary entry 20.09.2024.

¹²² Gagliano, *Thus Spoke The Plant*, p.14.

¹²³ Bastian et al., 'Introduction', *Participatory Research*. p9.

Hannah Pitt, 'An apprenticeship in plant thinking', in Bastian, Michelle, et al., *Participatory Research*, pp. 92-106.

¹²⁴ O'Connor, *The Place Speaks*.

*together*¹²⁵) and informed by a protocol discussed by Reason based on Skolimowski's concept of the participatory mind.¹²⁶



Figure 7
Aerial view (ordnance survey) of ☉, showing threshold and labyrinth path

PROTOCOL:

- **Preparing to listen.** Calming my thoughts through mindful attention and movement to attune to ☉ while jogging the labyrinth woven through the trees, (Figure 7) followed by sitting. If I had a specific question, I would sit outside mostly in the same place.
- **Offering a greeting** to ☉.

¹²⁵ *Concurrent with the writing of this section, I ask ☉ on my morning run, how they might like to contribute to this section – the words come immediately – how we live together. As I come to a halt, I experience a feeling of support as a softening of my body with an involuntary outbreath – lean on me ☉ it seems to say: include my presence as you write.*

¹²⁶ Peter, Reason, 'Transformations of time on ecological pilgrimage', in in Bastian, Michelle eds, *Participatory research*, p.69.

- **Inquiring as to ☉'s condition and interests** by asking “is there anything you would like to communicate to me” while calling to mind the research process through focused mental attention I found that this was best attempted with an attitude of a ‘beginner’s mind’ of not knowing, curiosity and patience.
- **Exploring and being open to the various ways that intercommunication might occur** through a process of intersubjective experimentation involving the active engagement of co-researchers in the testing out of hypotheses and exploring questions and hunches. This involved the interplay between ☉ and me, through my subjective experiences of ☉ through embodied senses, emotions, cognitions and transpersonal awareness and my responses to these stimuli which involved movement, drawing, writing and ritual. ☉'s communications were received by me through embodied thoughts/images provoked and evoked by enmeshment in the wider environment.¹²⁷
- **Giving thanks and gratitude at the end of our meeting.**
- **Writing up the interactions with ☉ contemporaneously** in a research diary, often outside, and on an almost daily basis, which allowed for a deepening and clarification of the initial experience.¹²⁸ The protocol is summarised in Figure 8.

¹²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p.222 and Abram, *Becoming Animal*, pp. 103-129.

¹²⁸ O'Connor, *Research log diary*.

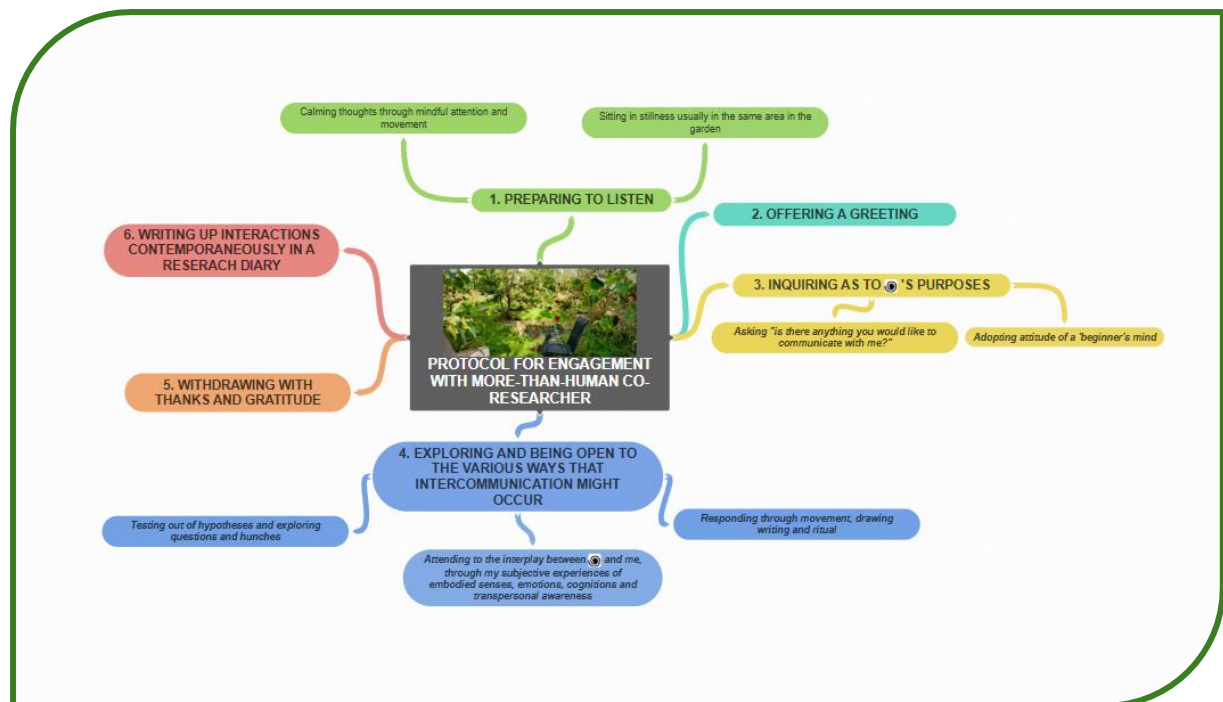


Figure 8

How we live together – visual map of protocol for engagement with ☉

Regarding issues of representation, notwithstanding as Simpraga et al¹²⁹ and Gorzelak¹³⁰ have evidenced, that more-than-human plants and trees respectively communicate through means other than language, there is the problem in Western academic research writing of excluding the non-worded contributions of more-than-human participants, with Van Bommel et al suggesting that these are often reported in the human researchers' 'own authorial voices'.¹³¹ Challenges to presenting ☉'s communications as faithfully as possible pertained both to the write up and presentation of data in ways that captured the non-worded contextual expressions of ☉'s contributions. The former was achieved by utilising different formatting styles to differentiate between my experience of ☉ communicating with me, (*green italics*), my own diary entries of reflections about the research (“*purple text within speech marks*”) and my

¹²⁹ Maja Šimpraga, Junji Takabayashi, and Jarmo K. Holopainen, , 'Language Of Plants: Where Is The Word?', *Journal of Integrative Plant Biology* 58.4 (2016), pp. 343-349.

¹³⁰ Monika A Gorzelak et al, 'Inter-plant Communication Through Mycorrhizal Networks Mediates Complex Adaptive Behaviour In Plant Communities', *AoB plants* 7 (2015).

¹³¹ Van Bommel, 'Transforming Convivial Conservation', p.143.

own contemporaneous reflections during the write-up which are footnoted in ***bold italics***.¹³² The textual presentation became a means of conveying the complex ongoing process of intersubjective reflexivity between the more-than-human and human co-researchers as it arose. Other writers have pointed to the need to develop writing styles that reflect the complexity of including an animate and intelligent world in human discourse; Kimmerer refers to the need for a grammar of animacy,¹³³ and Gagliano to ‘plant writing’.¹³⁴ ☉’s communications with me while writing up this research are included as drawings in the text where these have occurred. By the time the conclusion was being constructed, a new writing emerged which arose out of what seemed like another level of experiencing the intercommunications between ☉ and the human researcher, so that the writings blended into a single statement holding the voices of the two co-researchers.¹³⁵ The second issue involved capturing and conveying the multisensorial experience of working with ☉ through the use of photos, embedded recordings and diagrams which invite the reader to engage in an embodied way with the potentialities for more-than-human communication. For example, inspired by Fearnley et al who suggested that mind mapping may be useful to analyse and present data in qualitative research,¹³⁶ I used software to illustrate emergent themes visually so as to allow the reader to experience the complexity of communications from nature.¹³⁷ Haanpää et al suggest that videography offers a way to capture the unlanguage, sensuous and embodied qualities of the research context.¹³⁸ The video (Figure 9) of the daily jog offers the reader an embodied experience of the most frequent medium for intersubjective communication between the human and more-than-

¹³² The Key to these styles can be located on page 10.

¹³³ Robin Wall Kimmerer, ‘Learning The Grammar Of Animacy 1’, *Anthropology Of Consciousness* 28.2 (2017), pp. 128-134.

¹³⁴ Monica Gagliano, and Mavra Grimonprez, ‘Breaking The Silence - Language And The Making Of Meaning In Plants’, *Ecopsychology* 7.3 (2015), pp.145-152.

¹³⁵ “When I tune into ☉ as I think about the difficulty of using Mth-PR. I can feel [...] my mind thinking through the wider intelligence of this place. This is a new phase of my intercommunication. Somehow it feels more human but yet more inspired or inspired from the ground up where it meets my human mind. This requires a new writing”, Diary Log 06.03.2023 p. 52.

¹³⁶ Carina J Fearnley, ‘Mind Mapping In Qualitative Data Analysis: Managing Interview Data In Interdisciplinary And Multi-Sited Research Projects’, *Geo: Geography And Environment*, 9.1 (2022), and

Matthew Reason, ‘Mind Maps, Presentational Knowledge And The Dissemination Of Qualitative Research’, *Qualitative Inquiry* (2010), pp. 2-12, and

Chris Tattersall, Ann Watt, and Stephan Vermon, ‘Mind Mapping as a Tool in Qualitative Research’, *Nursing Times* 103.26 (2007), pp. 32–33.

¹³⁷ < <https://coggle.it/> >

¹³⁸ Minni Haanpää, et al ‘The Disruptive “Other”? Exploring Human-Animal Relations In Tourism Through Videography’, in Ivanova, Milka, Dorina-Maria Buda, and Elisa Burrai, eds. *Qualitative Methodologies In Tourism Studies: Disrupting And Co-Creating Critical Research*, (Routledge, 2022), pp. 101–121.

human co-researcher,¹³⁹ while the soundscape at the end of the dissertation captures the multi-layered 'gestalt' of participants involved in the research project (Figure 21).¹⁴⁰ Finally, as is evident from this discussion and suggested also by Hodgetts, attunement to the various ways more-than-humans communicate takes considerable time¹⁴¹ and this may conflict with time schedules and funding constraints set by human institutions.



Figure 9
Video of daily route through and with 🌀

3.3.2 Ethics and Human Participants

¹³⁹ Imogen O'Connor, *Research log diary* entry, op cit., 15.02.2025, p.48: "As I make today's run, the research loops into my mind and again, as is usual, I get an idea. To video a lap around the meadow, so that the reader gets a visual and visceral feel of a significant aspect of the research methodology. Immediately I make the video. After I make it, I wonder should I have included a picture of myself as part of this, but on watching the video, I can hear my breath, and I want to give the visual advantage to 🌀 while allowing myself to be part of the soundscape of the whole of us."

¹⁴⁰ Figure 19, *Soundscape at the conclusion of this project*, p. 82.

¹⁴¹ Timothy Hodgetts and Hester Parr, 'How We Nose', in *Participatory Research in More-than-Human Worlds*, in Bastian et al. (2016), p. 83.

Hennick et al. identify several aspects of ethics to be considered including informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, risk analysis and research integrity.¹⁴² All participants were informed of the purposes of the research and how the data would be stored, used and eventually disposed of, with an invitation to contact me directly with any questions. They were informed of the right to withdraw at any stage from the research and from answering any/all questions. Confidentiality was maintained firstly through the option to complete the survey anonymously, secondly by storing their responses on an encrypted cloud storage, and thirdly through the use of pseudonyms and removal of identifiable information in the dissertation text except where express permission was given. A risk assessment was carried out in relation to possible distress to participants and this was addressed by offering time for reflection at the end of the survey and the opportunity for interview participants to debrief at the end of the interview.

Ensuring the integrity of the research formed the backbone of the project and the more-than-human methodology which required reflexivity at every stage, and, almost daily diary entries¹⁴³ at the height of the research process helped ensure this. The following section further illustrates how research integrity was maintained; in the design of the survey in particular, and the focus for the in-depth interviews.

3.4 METHODS: DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

3.4.1 Design and data collection

The research utilised an online survey as defined by Hennink et al,¹⁴⁴ supported by nine interviews. A thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data.¹⁴⁵ Given this area was under-researched, a survey was chosen to facilitate a better understanding of a research

¹⁴² Monique M., Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods* 2nd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2020), p.72.

¹⁴³ The research log spans a period from 27.01.2024 to conclusion of this dissertation in July 2025: O'Connor, *Research Log Diary*.

¹⁴⁴ Hennink et al., *Qualitative Research*, p. 106.

¹⁴⁵ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. , 'Using Thematic Analysis In Psychology.' *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3.2 (2006), pp.77-101.

problem by exploring it from different perspectives,¹⁴⁶ and identifying emergent patterns from a relatively large number of participants than could be obtained from a smaller number of interviewees. It was envisaged that the survey would collect qualitative information, supported by quantitative data in the hope that the combined information would strengthen validity.¹⁴⁷ Sixty-five completed surveys were collected which included a body of rich text. Braun and Clarke, in discussing the pros and cons of whether the researcher should seek a rich description of the data set, or a detailed account of one aspect, identified the former approach as one allowing the reader to get a sense of the predominant themes, suggesting that while some depth may be lost, a rich overall description is still maintained.¹⁴⁸ In addition, it emerged through conversing with ☉ that the construction and dissemination of the survey and interactions of participants with the survey was more important to ☉ than the data extracted from it:

*This is not just about you and your research, there are those who need to consider the questions asked and this is enough in itself. The consideration of the questions has potential to bring people closer home to the wild embrace of life. Our purposes may not always coincide with yours.*¹⁴⁹

*We are speaking to them through you, through this questionnaire. We are calling them home to themselves.*¹⁵⁰

This interpretation of ☉'s position aligns with Braud and Anderson's contention that '[a]t the heart of transpersonal research is personal and social transformation',¹⁵¹ and with this in mind, semi-structured interviews were conducted at a later stage to explore the survey's potential as a transformative medium. A representative sample of nine participants was selected (regarding age, gender and geographical residence and experience of communications with place) from the forty who assented to engage in interviews.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁶ Hennink, et al., *Qualitative Research*, p.42.

Bell, Judith, and Waters, Stephen, *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide For First-Time Researchers*. (McGraw-Hill education, UK, 2018), p.25.

¹⁴⁷ Nahid Golafshani, 'Understanding Reliability And Validity In Qualitative Research', *The Qualitative Report*, 8.4 (2003), pp. 597–607.

¹⁴⁸ Braun and Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis'.

¹⁴⁹ O'Connor, *Research Log entry*, 14.09.2024, p. 8.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.10.2024, p. 12.

¹⁵¹ Braud, and Anderson, *Transpersonal Research*, p. 87.

¹⁵² See Appendix 2 for an outline of the interview questions.

As the survey was central to the research, careful consideration was given to its construction, through reflection with ☉.¹⁵³ The open-ended qualitative questions were positioned in the survey before quantitative questions to avoid influencing the responses of the participants. In addition, quantitative questions were crafted with reference to existing scales¹⁵⁴ and theoretical stances from the literature relating to phenomenology,¹⁵⁵ environmental ethics and environmental spirituality.¹⁵⁶ By doing this it was hoped to strengthen research validity. For example, questions were included concerning the identification of self with nature, adapted from two existing nature-relatedness scales,¹⁵⁷ and the dimensions of embodied nature experiences. With regard to ethical orientations towards human obligations to the environment: anthropocentric, light green, mid-green - which includes sentience and biocentric values - and dark-green holistic or ecocentric ethics¹⁵⁸ were reflected in question twenty-two, while Taylor's typology relating to spiritual 'dark green' beliefs underlying modern environmentalism¹⁵⁹ was captured in question twenty. Quantitative information was gathered using a mixture of multiple choice, Likert scales, and dichotomous questions.

In relation to participant selection and recruitment I sat with ☉ and received an image of a mycelium-like structure which I translated into a decision to invite participants not by virtue of their membership with human organisations, but through their connection with nature places, or the custodians of these nature places.¹⁶⁰ This approach seemed congruent with the subject matter of the research, redirecting the focus from human-centred systems to connections with more-than-human ones. The custodians of selected nature centres were invited to distribute the online survey. A snowball sampling method, which Hennink et al suggest is used when

¹⁵³ See appendix 1 for an outline of the survey and a summary of the results.

¹⁵⁴ Elizabeth K Nisbet, John M. Zelenski, and Steven A. Murphy, 'The Nature Relatedness Scale: Linking Individuals' Connection With Nature To Environmental Concern And Behavior', *Environment and Behavior*, 41.5 (2009), pp. 715–40., and Daniel R. Williams and Jerry J. Vaske, , 'The Measurement Of Place Attachment: Validity And Generalizability Of A Psychometric Approach', *Forest Science* 49.6 (2003), pp. 830-840.

¹⁵⁵ Particularly associated with Abram, *The Spell*, and Merlieu-Ponty, *Phenomenology*.

¹⁵⁶ See Appendix 2 for an outline of the survey.

¹⁵⁷ Nisbet, et al., 'Nature Relatedness'.

¹⁵⁸ Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, pp.53-126.

¹⁵⁹ Taylor, *Dark Green*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁶⁰ Brigit's Garden, Co. Galway, An Talamh, Skreen, Co. Sligo, Cran Og Eco farm, Co. Galway, and The Organic Centre, Co. Leitrim.

researching atypical experiences by inviting participants to recruit others to the study,¹⁶¹ was applied in order to create opportunities for participants to 'seed' themselves into the research in a more organic way.¹⁶² The survey was conducted over five weeks in November–December 2024, with interviews following in April–May 2025. The delay was due to the substantial amount of data to thematise and initial uncertainty about the necessity of interviews, which required reflection before proceeding. Although the time-lag between survey and interviews somewhat hindered participant recall, this was mitigated by providing interviewees with their completed surveys beforehand and revisiting key themes at the start of the interview.

3.4.2 Data Analysis

Qualitative responses were thematically analysed following a six-stage protocol outlined by Braun and Clarke.¹⁶³ They make the distinction between an inductive and deductive approach in the identification of themes.¹⁶⁴ As I was not sure what themes might emerge given the lack of previous research in the Irish context, I chose an inductive approach, linking the themes to the data themselves, and desisting, until the analysis was completed, from engaging with the literature, which might have narrowed my field of vision.¹⁶⁵ Each contribution was coded, grouped into tentative themes, reassessed then reassigned to themes and subthemes before being arranged within broader themes. Visual representations helped me engage with the data and refine the themes. This involved sitting with ☉ to see what might emerge. I was following an approach described by Ettling where she meditates with the material allowing herself to be acted upon by the data.¹⁶⁶ In my case, I allowed myself to be acted upon by ☉. During this interchange with ☉, looking up into their bare birch branches, I experienced a moment of imagining all sixty-five voices singing at once, through all the questions, as interconnected

¹⁶¹ Hennink et al, *Qualitative Research*, p.104.

¹⁶² ***I notice as I write this, having returned from being outside with ☉ that I did not mention my co-researcher or their role to the human participants in the study. I wonder how I could have made such a central decision to exclude ☉'s central place in the research. I am shocked that I am still operating with a western mindset which excludes the participation of more-than-human and marginalised human beings.***

¹⁶³ Gareth Terry, Hayfield, Nikki, Clarke, et al "Thematic Analysis", in Carla Willig and Wendy Stainton Rogers, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research In Psychology* (SAGE Publications, 2017), [accessed online on 10 January 2025], pp 17-38.

¹⁶⁴ Braun and Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis'.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Dorothy Ettling, 'Levels of listening' in Braud and Anderson, *Transpersonal Research*, pp. 176-179.

branches on the same tree – one gestalt, many themes¹⁶⁷. This became the inspiration for the video at the end of the dissertation.¹⁶⁸ Figure 10 illustrates this process from initial data coding to revised themes for each question and finally, to the interpretation of overarching themes relating to the research questions for the data as a whole with the aim of offering ‘...a rich thematic description of...[the] entire data set’.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Imogen O'Connor, *Research Log diary*, 10.01.2025, p.41

¹⁶⁸ ***As I complete this section, I am aware of a tension between knowing that I have enough data to complete the project in the best interest of all the participants, and the concern that the university standards might not be satisfied by the survey alone. I start wondering if should I conduct a few interviews, while noting the previous decision made with ☺ to not to do so. I converse with ☺ and receive the following response: ...we will choose [interviewees] together in order to build a good connection between you and the other human person, to allow for expression of deep truths and the beliefs underlying relationships with nature and ethical behaviours to us more than human persons. Much might not be used in your writing, but change will have occurred by virtue of the conversation. Seek to look for the change and not data – 14.12.2024.***

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 11.

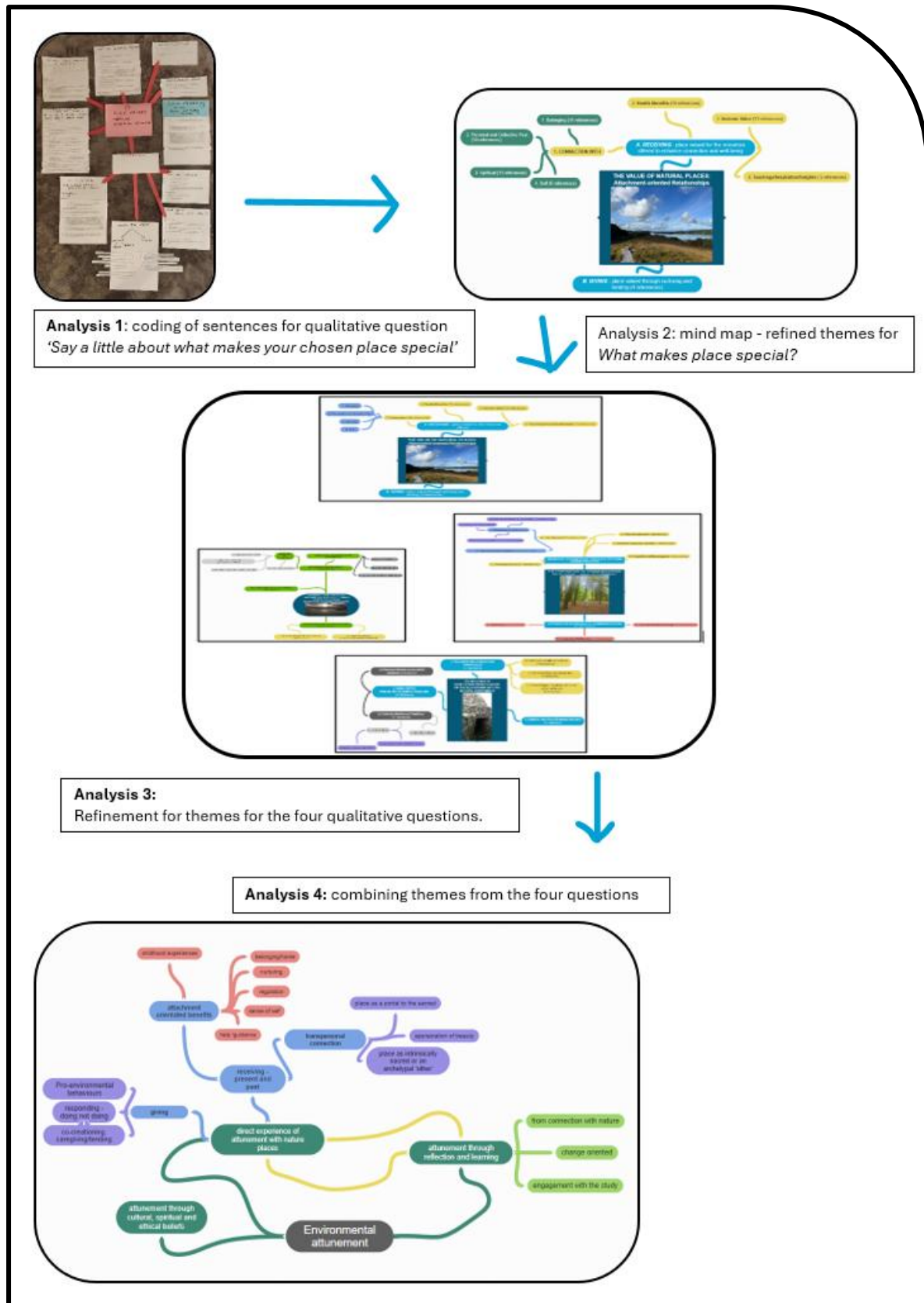


Figure 10
Stages in the progression of the thematic analysis

I recorded how many participants mentioned each theme to highlight recurring patterns within the data set. As the survey was the main medium through which participants expressed their beliefs and behaviours, careful attention was paid to assign a pseudonym to each quote used which corresponded to a particular participant in order to honour the personhoods behind the quotes. Quotes were only selected from participants currently or previously living in Ireland.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section employs a thematic analysis to critically present the findings of the research and begins with a demographic description of the participants.

4.1 ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

Sixty-five participants completed the survey, fifty-one identifying as female and thirteen as male with one preferring not to say. Fifty-three were aged forty-five and above. As there were no exclusion criteria for participants relating to nationality and place of residence, participants reported living or having lived in a wide variety of places including mainland UK, Europe, the US and Australia. Fifty-five participants were currently living on the island of Ireland, most of these (forty-six) in rural or mixed urban/rural settings, with forty-one residing in the same place for over ten years. Research is inconclusive as to whether living in rural areas increases a propensity for nature connectedness.¹⁷⁰ The most frequently cited daily activities for participants from high to low were research and education, working with nature/outdoors, medical/healthcare/counselling, caring for others, community/social work and religious/spiritual work. This suggests that these participants had regular opportunities for relating not only with humans but with more-than-humans and thus possibly experienced more practice in interpersonal attunement than the general population. ☺'s contribution at the time of writing concludes this section (Figure 11).

¹⁷⁰ For example, see Daniel J Anderson, and Tobias Krettenauer, 'Connectedness To Nature And Pro-Environmental Behaviour From Early Adolescence To Adulthood: A Comparison Of Urban And Rural Canada', *Sustainability* 13.7 (2021), p.3. [accessed online 9th July 2025].

Maria Fernanda Duron-Ramos, et al., 'The Role Of Urban/Rural Environments On Mexican Children's Connection To Nature And Pro-Environmental Behavior', *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020), pp. 2-4, [accessed online 9th July 2025].



Figure 11

Contemporaneous communication from © (27.02.2025)

4.2 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The research followed three lines of inquiry: firstly, how the participants described their experiential relationships with nature places they felt connected to, secondly, their identification of spiritual-cultural heritage and pro-environmental beliefs and behaviours, and thirdly, insights/experiences arising out of engaging with the survey. The number of references made to each theme/sub-theme refers only to the survey data (except where stated otherwise), with quotes taken mainly from the survey. Interview quotes are identified in the footnotes.

Environmental attunement emerged as a meta-theme manifesting through all three research questions (Figure 12). Drawing on sources in the literature from Welch et al and others,¹⁷¹ we created for the purposes of this study, the following description of environmental attunement

¹⁷¹ The human and more-than-human co-researchers.

as an embodied relational process involving an awareness of and receptivity to the human and more-than-human environment and its cultural context, encouraging intersubjective engagement¹⁷² which cultivates a sense of harmony and belonging, along with the formation of ecological identities and responsibilities.

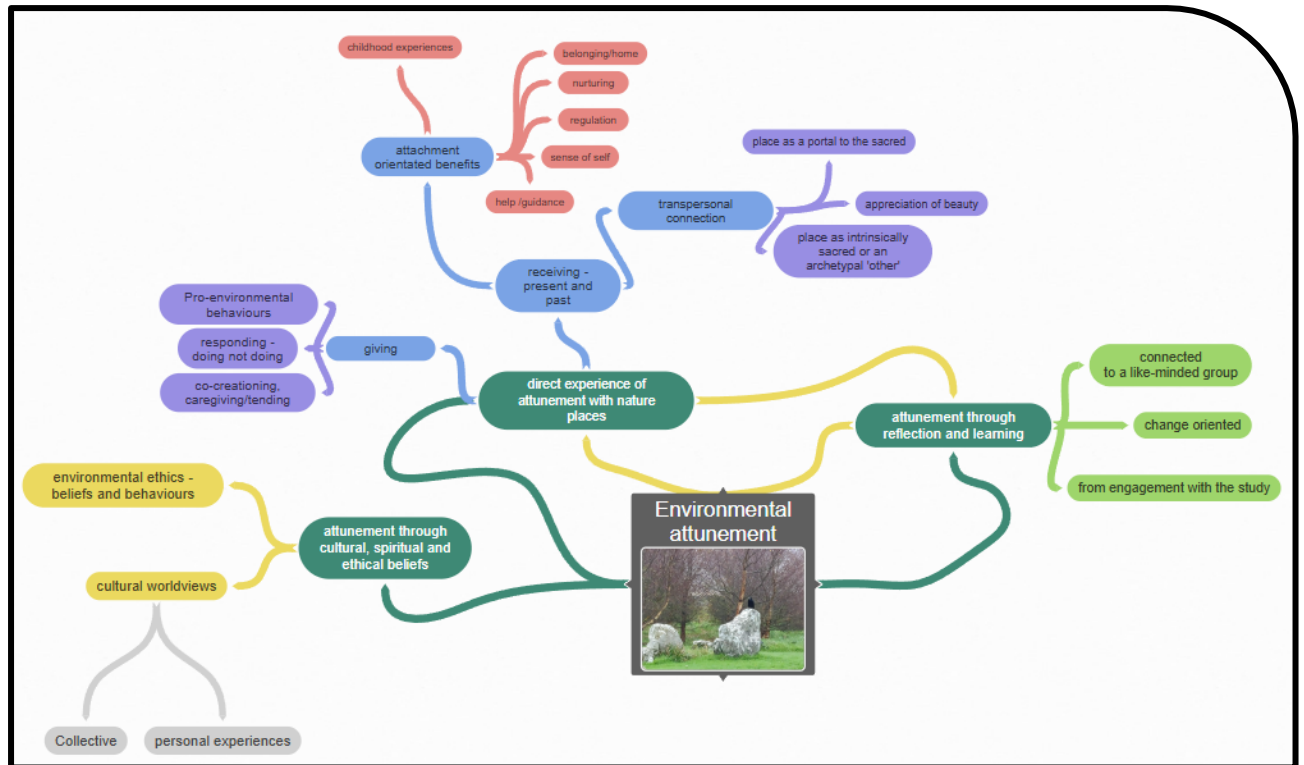


Figure 12
Environmental Attunement

4.2.1 Direct experience of attunement with nature places

Participants described incidences of attunement firstly in relation to their attachment to valued nature places and secondly, through their perceived ability to experience and respond to communications from these nature places (Figure 13).

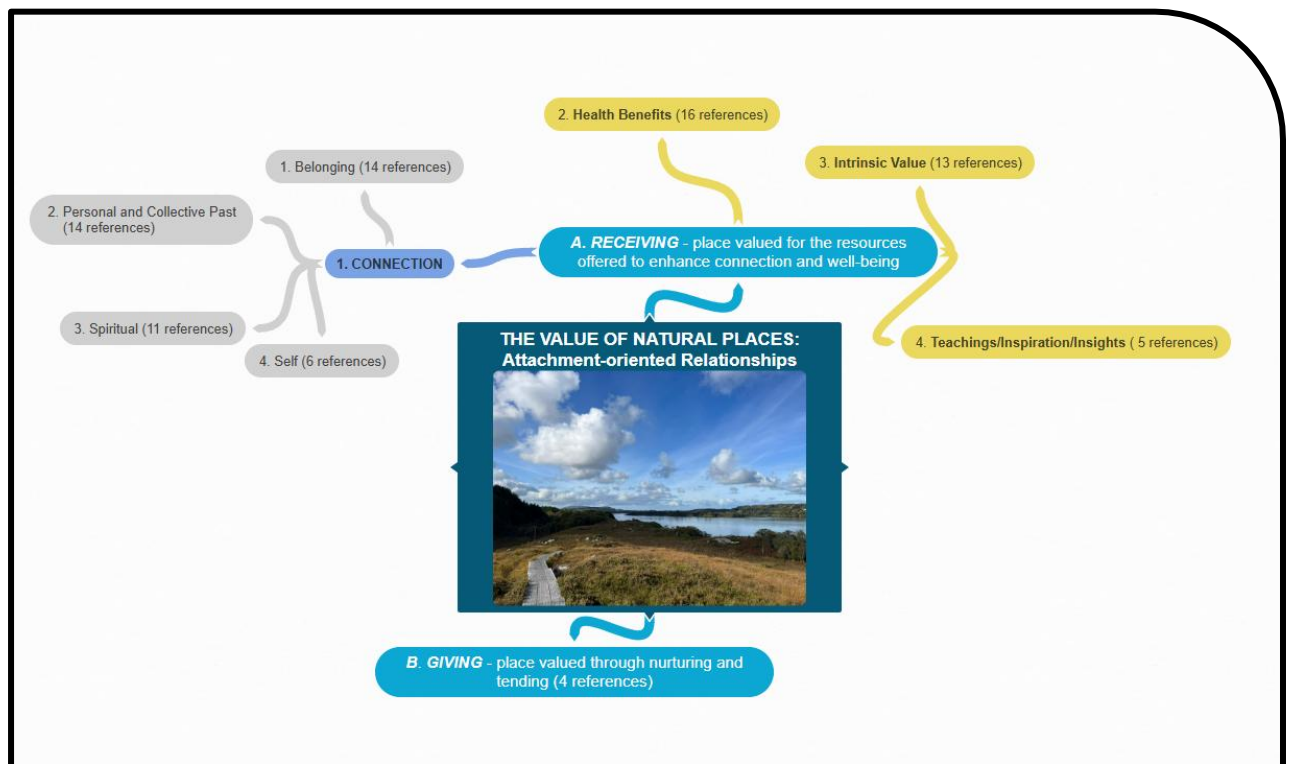


Figure 13
 Visual map of attachment-orientated themes with number of references for each subtheme

The attachment value of nature places: The most cited overall theme for participants when describing what was special about their place in nature was an experience of some aspect of *secure attachment-oriented relationships*. Human attachment theory has previously been identified by Chawla, and Little and Derr as a useful construct to explore attachment to nature places.¹⁷³ Howe identifies several features of secure attachment in inter-human relationships including their offering a haven and secure base through the development of affectional bonds, caregiving and receiving and regulation of emotional states, all of which offer a mirror for the development of a sense of self.¹⁷⁴ This was corroborated by sixty-two participants who

¹⁷³ Louise Chawla, 'Childhood Experiences Associated With Care For The Natural World: A Theoretical Framework For Empirical Results', *Children, Youth and Environments* 17.4 (2007), pp. 144-170. Sarah Little and Derr, Victoria, 'The Influence Of Nature On A Child's Development: Connecting The Outcomes Of Human Attachment And Place Attachment', *Research Handbook On Childhoodnature* (Springer, Cham, 2018), p. 9.

¹⁷⁴ David Howe, *Attachment Across The Lifecourse: A Brief Introduction* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), pp. 3-28.

reported feeling connected or very connected with nature and the earth. This attachment model aligns with research studies in other cultural contexts which show that connectedness to nature is associated with pro-environmental behaviours and beliefs.¹⁷⁵

In general, participants identified their nature place as a resource for receiving benefits, particularly through belonging (including childhood memories and sense of home), to the prehistoric and early Christian landscape and ancestors, to the beauty and mysterious aspects of place, to a deeper connection to self, and finally through soothing, healing experiences of emotional and mental regulation:

My childhood! I grew up in constant connection with the earth and my place in it.
(Leena)

...I feel like I belong here. (Melissa)

I have a strong soul connection to Carrowkeel and visit these tombs as often as I can to mark birthdays, losses, and 'the milestones of a year's turning'. It's a place where I feel connected to my ancestors, a place where I get to drink in the sacredness of this amazing landscape and history. (Patricia)

... And I feel part of it like it is now part of me, a part that I would be lost without. It makes me feel at peace... (Katie).

Walking through these woods, I faced and confronted a period of deep professional and personal crisis. Now, when I return, they give me a sense of wholeness and healing.
(Una)

A lesser theme, significant by virtue of it being a minority expression, was the valuing of a relationship built upon giving rather than receiving, through the custodianship and tending of a nature place. This was expressed by four participants, exemplified by Jin's description:

¹⁷⁵ For example, Nisbet, 'The Nature Relatedness Scale', p. 733.

Leanne Martin, et al., 'Nature Contact, Nature Connectedness And Associations With Health, Wellbeing And Pro-Environmental Behaviours', *Journal Of Environmental Psychology*, 68 (2020), pp. 1-54 [accessed online on 9th July 2025] and

Liuna Geng, et al., 'Connections With Nature And Environmental Behaviors', *PLoS one* 10.5 (2015), pp. 1-11 [accessed online on 9th July 2025].

I live on the edge of this space, and it means more than the house...I mean I won't move...because I want to care for this space. I maintain and nurture this space and all the other than human elements therein...There is building and development going on near to my house and recently a whole copse of wild area adjacent to this space was felled. This has made me more determined to protect and maintain. (Jin)

It is striking that most participants valued their nature place for what it offered them. This might possibly reflect a wider issue in the Western tradition identified as having a bearing in the current environmental crisis where nature is viewed primarily as a resource for human beings.¹⁷⁶ Maureen illustrates this when describing the experience of relationships with nature being less complicated than those with humans:¹⁷⁷ ‘...it's how you feel when you're there and...you'll never feel indebted to a place, or like you owe a place something. You're just there to enjoy it...’. When asked did she ever feel place needed something itself she replied that she had never thought about it, but on consideration, added: ‘Maybe it wants me to feed back into it. I suppose that's why you pick up rubbish when you're down the beach, isn't it?’ In this instance, the question itself led to more consideration of the place having needs, illustrating the link between the significance of relatedness between humans and the more-than-human environment and pro-environmental behaviours.

Experiencing communications: In this study, a central question in the exploration of human relationships with nature places is whether or not participants reported experiencing nature places communicating with them and if so, what aspects of the natural environment did they feel engaged with them and in what way? Both Lindsay and Abram suggest that capacity for attunement with the ‘other’ of the natural environment through embodied sensual awareness is required in order to experience engagement in relationships with the more-than-human.¹⁷⁸ While forty-three participants initially agreed that they had felt their chosen place communicating with them, fifty participants proceeded to describe instances of their chosen nature place communicating with them. Subsequently, fifty-nine identified modalities through which they experienced communication occurring. In addition, notwithstanding that some did

¹⁷⁶ Nathaniel. Wolloch, *Nature In The History Of Economic Thought: How Natural Resources Became An Economic Concept*, (London: Routledge, 2016), p.3.

¹⁷⁷ Interview transcript.

¹⁷⁸ Abram, *The Spell*, pp ix-x.
Branham, *Embodied Earth*, p.22

not indicate experiencing direct communications, sixty-four participants indicated how they were able to ascertain the interests of the natural environment. Perhaps, these apparently incongruent results indicate as Patton suggests, that layered questioning encourages a deepening reflection in which more latent or harder to express experiences could be identified.¹⁷⁹

Figure 14 illustrates various ways of knowing that participants used to ascertain environmental interests, indicating the blending of scientific, logical knowledge with intuitive/observational/spiritual knowledge associated with indigenous cultures.

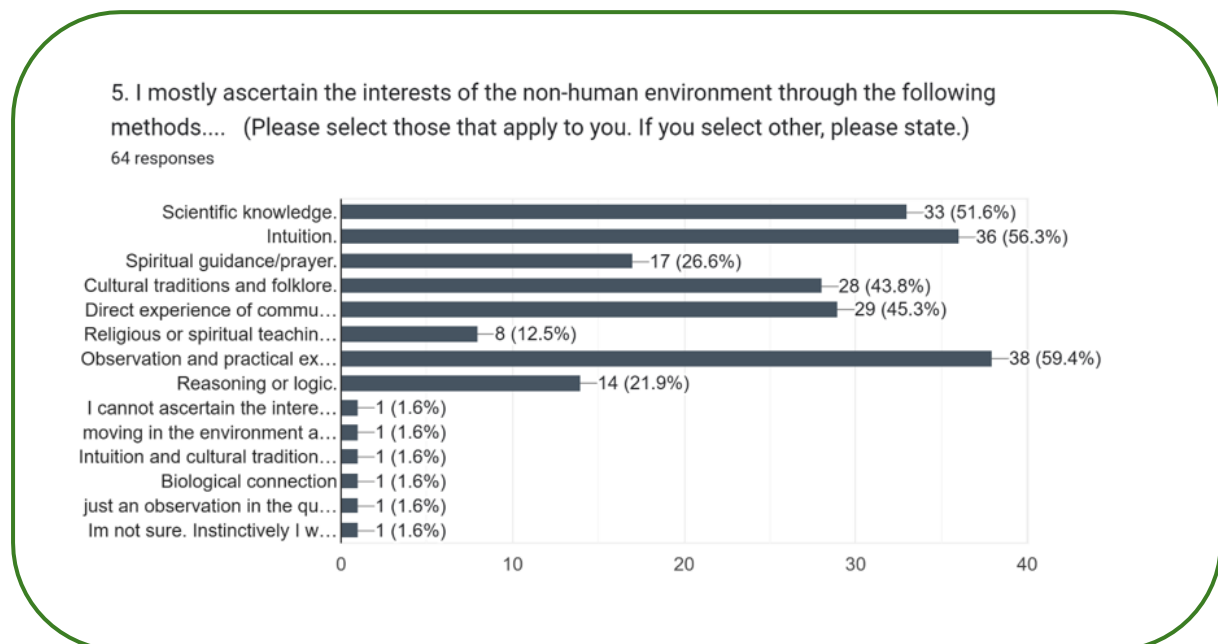


Figure 14

Methods for ascertaining the interests of the more-than-human environment

The results indicate a cultural acceptance for the validity of various ways of knowing, with observation ranking higher than scientific knowledge. Observational knowing is associated with traditional ecological knowledge, which Kimmerer describes as arising out ‘...of long intimacy

¹⁷⁹ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research And Evaluation Methods*, 4th edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015), pp. 421-599.

and attentiveness to a homeland and can arise wherever people are materially and spiritually integrated with their landscape¹⁸⁰ and as Blackie suggests, through instinctual intuitive knowing associated with Celtic spirituality.¹⁸¹

Two interrelated subthemes were identifiable in participants' references to experiences of communications from nature places (Figure 15): *reciprocity* (relational opportunities for receiving and giving), and the implicit or explicit recognition of the *animacy* of nature places and their constituent elements. These nature elements were frequently viewed as intrinsically relational and imbued with agency, offering particular affordances for spiritual connection, support, care and insights.¹⁸² These themes are illustrated below with reference to the various modalities through which communications were experienced. The modalities are listed from highest to lowest numbers of references, as transpersonal, sensorial, emotional and cognitive.

¹⁸⁰ Kimmerer, *Weaving Traditional*, p. 433.

¹⁸¹ Blackie, *If Women Rose*, p120.

¹⁸² ***I received a flash of insight talking about the research this evening with a friend. As I described with ease the themes, I am now so familiar with, I started to articulate another broader theme by noticing what is absent from the contributions by participants. I see how now I have to let go of the themes as I constructed them and allow more fluid ones to emerge.*** *Diary log entry 11.03.2025 p.53.*

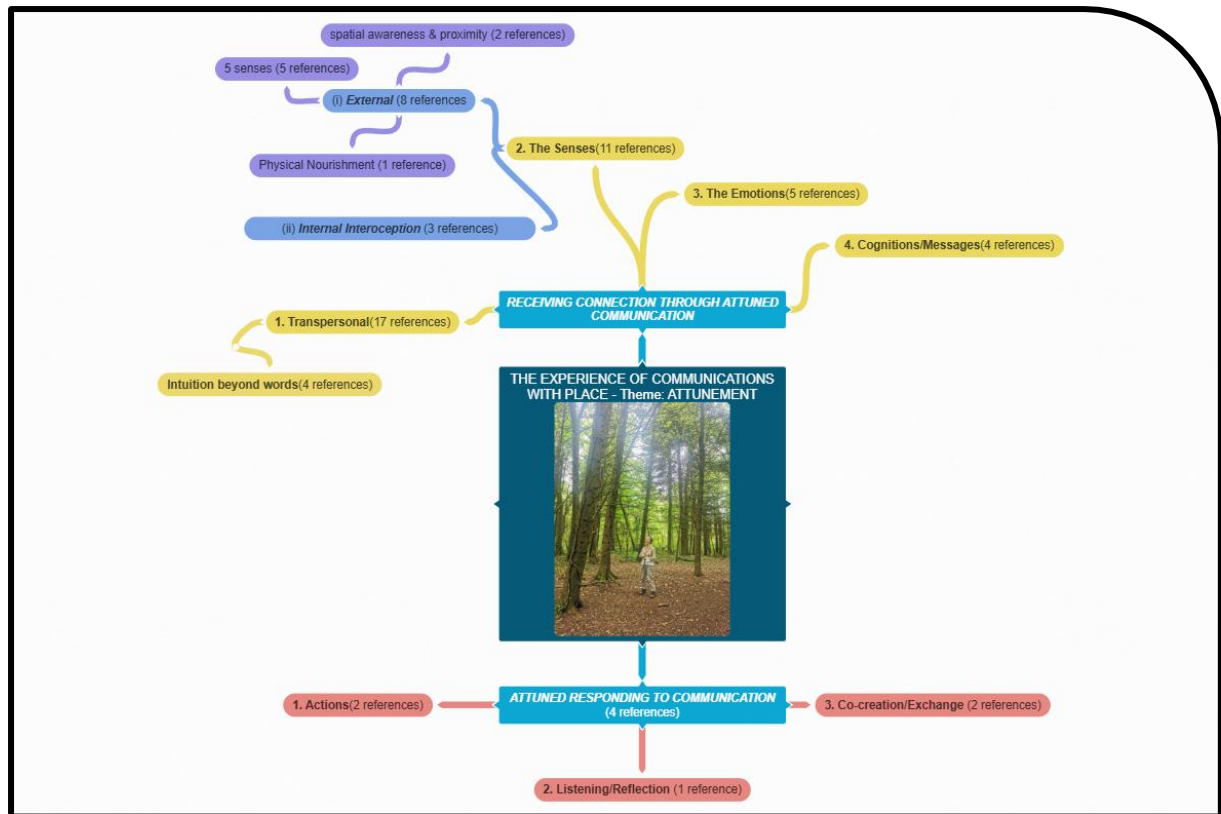


Figure 15
Experiences of communications with nature places

The most frequently cited conduit for communication was through what could be termed *transpersonal attunement* (seventeen references). This had several manifestations: those involving connections through place through an expanded sense of self in interconnectedness with nature, those offering connection with a universal/collective consciousness including spiritual experiences of awe and wonder, dreams and soul connection and finally, those expressing connection with archetypal personifications. Sometimes, these communications were experienced as intuitive and difficult to describe in words.

The communication was more that it invited me into a sense of self and a sense of connection with so much more than self. (Ruby)

It helps me restore a sense of order within myself, and that somehow, I'm able to give a bit of that order back to the place. (Katie)

This place is quite literally my 'bedrock' and it is like reading 'God's old dairies' (Prof. John Feehan). I am full of wonder as I swim around them. (Sally)

... something "other". And that connection is felt within body and mind, though not easy to express in words as one perceives it in the soul or consciousness, rather than with an overt sense like touch or taste or smell. I suppose one could call it a resonance with something "spiritual" - whether there are indeed spirits or spiritual forces or 'spirits of place', or if it is simply an acknowledgement of love and the life force and power and wonder and beauty and melancholy of nature... something ancient and of that place and also "other - not limited to that place but apparent in it. (Rachel)

Seven participants described their experience of communication through imagery and metaphor particularly through anthropocentric images, involving experiences of being held, cared for or mothered by place. These transpersonal experiences involved in varying degrees a sense of receiving support, care and information pertaining to issues of direct relevance to the humans involved. Such experiences illustrated the regulation associated with attachment relationships between human caregivers and infants in which the infant receives soothing and also upregulation as a result of the attunement of the caregiver to the infant's needs.¹⁸³ Thus, Aisling recalled when:

Visiting when very stressed, I felt it reassured me, soothed me, a kind of the archetypal' loving mother 'type feeling of being embraced...(Aisling)

Alannah and Katie had similar experiences:

When visiting after the passing of my Mum as I sat at the lake which is surrounded by a mountain, I felt like the mountain was wrapping around me in a big hugs the lake gathered my tears. (Alannah)

It cares for me and protects me while I am there. I put my thoughts out to god and he listens but I share secrets with this place... (Katie)

For Annie, place offered a portal to an experience of the divine feminine and other spirits present in the land:

¹⁸³ Daniel J Siegel, and Mary Hartzell, *Parenting from the inside out: How a deeper self-understanding can help you raise children who thrive* (Penguin, 2013), pp 65-66.

...I feel that it is an "in between place", a threshold. The Goddess is close. I feel more creative here than [I] ever have in my life. There isn't a eureka moment but a sense of being part of something and acceptance by the land and the spirits. (Annie)

Blackie, writing about women's role in reigniting deep connection with the natural environment through indigenous ways of knowing describes the Celtic cultural heritage of associating archetypal figures in mythical stories such as the Cailleach Béara (the Hag of Béara) myth with particular natural features of the landscape.¹⁸⁴

Regarding communication through *sensorial attunement*, fifty-nine percent of participants reported receiving communications through one or some of their five senses and fifty-six percent through interoceptive visceral awareness. These contributions illustrate embodied embedded experience described by Merleau-Ponty and Abram.¹⁸⁵

I feel that it's mostly the trees that communicate messages to me there usually while I'm feeling such high Beauty vibrations by deeply viewing, appreciating & sensing them ... (Aisling)

One turtle stayed by my side for around an hour and was very calm and went about their business eating food. I was able to dive down and get very close and looked the turtle in the eyes. I had an out of body experience and felt a connection that I've never felt again. (Ellie).

For Melissa, this involved the experience of physical nourishment – ‘...The well water nourishes me, grounds me...’. Other participants described communications received through internal sensory apparatus, including gut feeling and awareness of inner bodily rhythms:

When I came here first this place told me it "chose" me to live here. This was received as a very strong gut instinct and a "hearing" of this choice. (Tricia)

Onya described her instinctual experience of embodied intercommunication with place:

¹⁸⁴ Blackie, *If Women Rose*.

¹⁸⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, and Abram, *The Spell*.

There was an instinct ... inside...somehow it was connected to a message from the outside too. There was a sort of an interplay between your own instinct, or it felt like a...communication from the place.

Maureen, when considering personal resonance with place, alluded to potential experiences of somatic clenching in the stomach when environments are out of alignment and ‘... places kind of don’t feel right down the middle.’¹⁸⁶

From an analysis of references by participants to natural places it is interesting to note that when personhood was represented through gender, they assigned them as female, (she/mother earth/ Pachamama) or as non-binary (‘it/they’). A study by Reynolds et al on gender and nature, found that women were more associated with nature than men.¹⁸⁷

Regarding *emotional attunement*, seventy-two percent of the fifty-nine participants who reported receiving communications did so through emotions: ‘Not verbal, but I experience a sense of calmness, belonging, safety...’ (Onya).

In relation to *cognitive attunement*, four participants reported being given insights into problems or being guided to ponder, for example, Cailín recounts that ‘The rocks I was lying on had a very clear message about my genetic makeup.’

From this analysis, it appears that while transpersonal interpretations were frequently bestowed on experiences, the centrality of emotions and the senses as conduits for these interpretations align with Merleau-Ponty’s argument that perception is not merely a cognitive process but is fundamentally affective and embodied¹⁸⁸ It became apparent from the analysis that while it was possible to thematise participants’ experiences, the rich complexity of the embodied experience of intersubjective communication might be collapsed. Ursula’s account of her embodied movement experience illustrates this:

¹⁸⁶ Interview.

¹⁸⁷ Reynolds, Catherine, and Nick Haslam, ‘Evidence For An Association Between Women And Nature: An Analysis Of Media Images And Mental Representations’, *Ecopsychology* 3.1 (2011), pp. 59-64.

¹⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*.

I have felt answers from how my body responds when being in this space. I may ask myself a question and my body responds in a clear way when in this space. For me, what the forest directly shows me without using my body as a gauge feels most deep. I have found myself naturally drawn to look, stop, touch, smell something in the forest e.g. recently a part of a tree that was damaged, had broken from the main. I felt moved when I saw all the life that that part of the tree was sustaining. I was moved by the beauty in how it was still part of the life of the forest, although it was decaying in itself. The naturalness at which this happened, made me challenge my thinking around injury and decay. (Ursula)

In most of the descriptions portrayed above, even when communication was described as embodied or emotional, it appears that participants were, on the whole, describing receiving communications which involved the construction of abstract interpretations about the meanings attributed to signs from nature places. These experiences seem to contrast with less abstract communications described as *multisensory communication* by Van Bommel and Booman-Berson, which involves a two-way interaction in which both humans and more-than-human beings leave signs in the landscape which can be read by both.¹⁸⁹

Participants who experienced communication were able to identify, from a menu, which aspects of the environment they experienced communicating with them and how they responded to the communication (Figure 16). Over half indicated that they perceived communications coming from the entire ecosystem, with forty-five percent perceiving communications emanating from elemental natural features such as water, rock, twenty-nine percent through flora, nineteen percent through fauna, twenty-two percent through supernatural or spiritual connections, and nine percent through the weather. Some availed of the 'other' category to convey the complexity of their visceral and spiritual engagement with not only the ecosystem, but also with the weather, with history and human connection embedded place.

I ticked all of these as I believe there are multiple levels of communication or 'resonance' due to the interconnectedness of all things, all creatures, built or site-chosen places of significance to mankind, and the "Unseen" - a numinous sense of presence, be it supernatural or intrinsic to a place. (Rachel)

¹⁸⁹ Van Bommel 'Transforming Convivial Conservation', P.141.

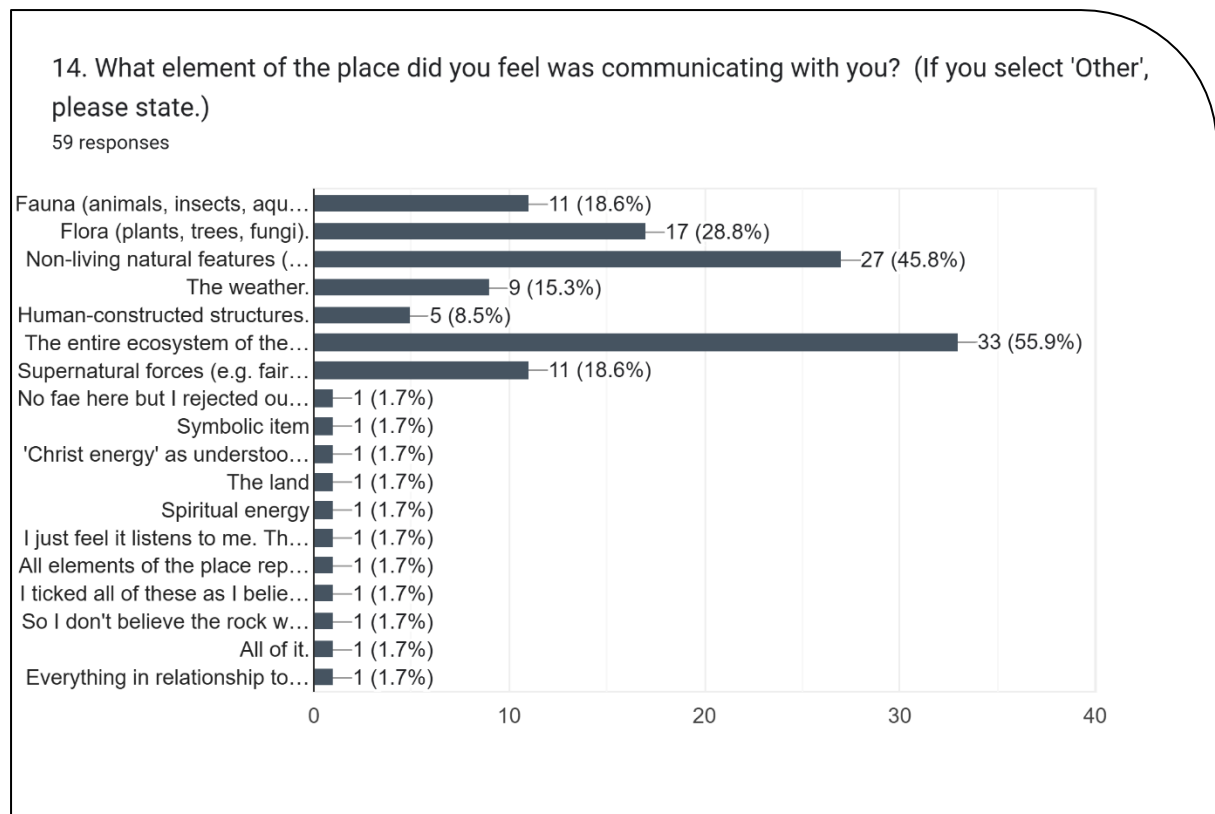


Figure 16

Elements of nature places offering communications

Responses to communications:¹⁹⁰ When asked directly, all fifty-eight participants indicated that they responded in one way or another to these communications and in doing so pointed to the presence of an intersubjective attunement in these nature relationships. Eighty-three percent of those experiencing communications from place responded emotionally, with ninety-one percent agreeing with the statement 'I felt a sense of awe or wonder after my experience of place communicating its interests' and twenty-five participants reporting responding with spiritual ritual or prayer:

¹⁹⁰ ***As I write this section, and read more carefully into the participant's contributions, it occurs to me that all these responses are signs of a giving back to the environment – even if done unconsciously, in the intersubjective exchange of affordances the moment between human and more-than-human which may have benefits for the latter that may not be ascertained at the time.*** (28.05.2025).

... I felt strongly that I was welcomed and held. The place was aware of me and allowed my ritual and was part of it. (Maria)

... I came to visit this place with a friend ... I envisaged going together and playing music there as I had on other occasions by myself. Once we both arrived the level of stillness was immensely deep, and any sound felt disturbing to that atmosphere that felt utterly sacred. We abandoned our plan of music making and spent much quieter time there. It was divine and felt appreciated by the place too. (Eve)

Aran and Onya described engaging with regular ritual practices with the land they were connected with.¹⁹¹ Aran engaged in a daily morning greeting of the mountain visible from his house as a way of showing appreciation, gratitude and acknowledgement for the land in its own right. Onya described a weekly cacao ceremony where 'I... just...go out to the end of my garden and just thank her...it's just a sense of looking after.' She also spoke about engaging in healing with another piece of land in family ownership where she sensed "stuck" energy which she attributed to historical intergenerational trauma with roots in the great famine of the 1850's. This involved consulting with a land healer and practically intervening by putting '... two bits of copper into the land onto the [part of the land] - we think it's a lay[line]...?'

Other responses involved physical movement and verbal expression and taken together, suggest not only that the embodied, emotional aspect of attunement is a key feature in these intersubjective communications, but even more significantly, the experience of nature for the majority of participants is imbued with awe. Curry identifies this in his exploration of enchantment describing it as both material and spiritual; embodied, wildly unpredictable and rooted in a more than human world which is animated by agency.¹⁹²

Finally, eleven participants indicated that they responded behaviourally by withdrawing from the place or avoiding further disturbance of it and seven by engaging in tending through cleaning up, gardening or repair.

Once I arrived and for an unknown reason I turned around and went away again. Something wasn't right and it let me know this... (Onya)

¹⁹¹ Interviews.

¹⁹² Curry, *Enchantment*, pp. 77-78.

The discussion so far indicates that all participants responded in various ways to the communication received, and while participants' overall experience was of receiving many benefits from engagement with place, their responses to these experiences, whether or not manifesting a conscious intent of giving back, could be said from the viewpoint of animism to offer multifarious affordances to the communicating environment.

4.2.2 Attunement through cultural, spiritual and ethical beliefs

Cultural and religious influences: Participants described their cultural/spiritual beliefs and experiences regarding their connection with nature, and their beliefs regarding ethical responsibilities towards the environment. (Figure 17).

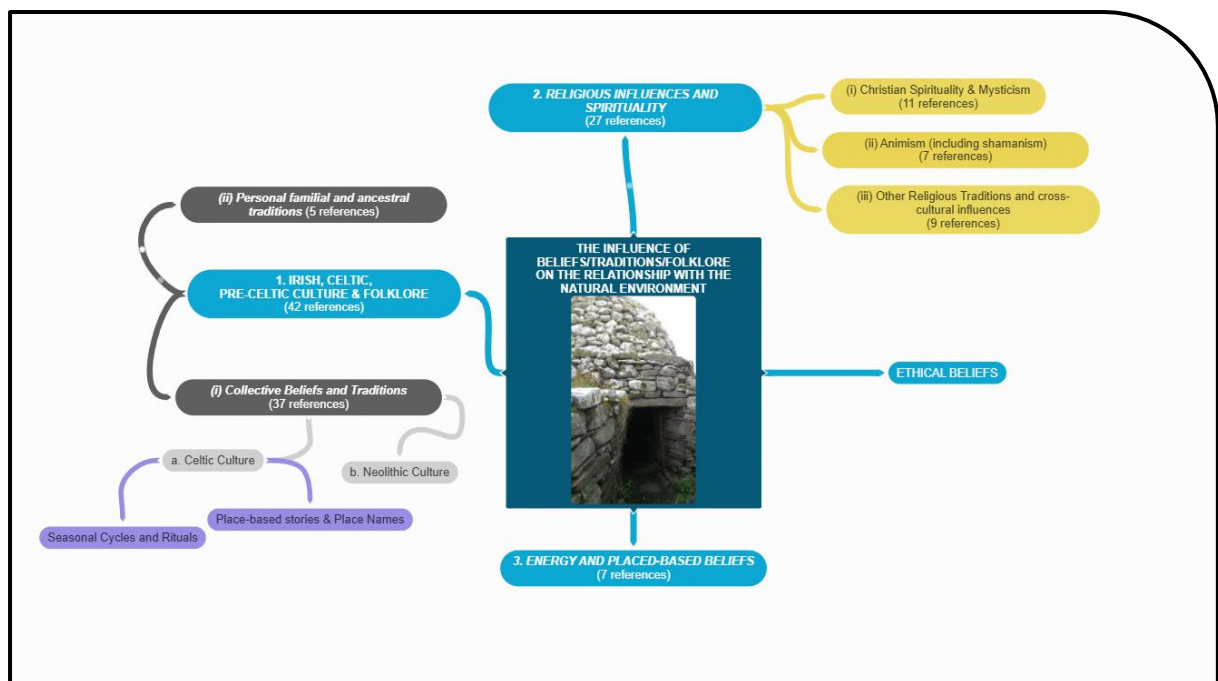


Figure 17
The influence of folklore, and spiritual and environmental beliefs on relationship with the natural environment

Fifty-five participants offered textual responses to the question: *Can you identify any spiritual beliefs, cultural traditions or folklore, that have had a particular influence on your own relationship with places in nature and the wider environment in general?* While three participants were not able to identify an influence, the remainder made comments which were each accommodated in part or in their entirety within one of three themes presented in descending order of most cited. Firstly, Celtic, pre-Celtic and general Irish cultural traditions and beliefs at collective and personal levels, secondly, religious influences and spirituality and thirdly, energy and place-based beliefs. Woven through all themes and in keeping with the previous section, these beliefs reflected an environmental attunement that implied attitudes towards nature as imbued with intelligence, agency and animacy. In relation to Irish Celtic and pre-Celtic culture and folklore, some responses alluded to animistic orientations in terms of nature holding sacred consciousness with consequent relational and ethical duties towards these conscious elements. Harvey reminds us that animism infers ethical responsibilities as a result of a sense of kinship with more than humans which are viewed as having personhood.¹⁹³ Thus, for John,

...there is no division between sacred and mundane. This leads me to view nature and place as both conscious and sacred and makes it important to me to develop a sense of relationship.

Rachel stated that 'Inherent to myth and folklore is the idea of "take no more than you need", maintain balance, and show respect for the land and its denizens.' Others pointed to the importance of the cyclical nature of time, part of many indigenous belief systems¹⁹⁴ through '...the 8 spoked wheel of the year...', (Ron) and '[t]he Celtic cycle of the seasons, traditions of Brigit and the Cailleach'. (Breedge).

The agency and sacredness of nature places and more-than-human persons was also recognised, as was the importance of folklore in informing relationship to place. Áróin remembered '...the fascination when in school of how trees were sacred in the ways of the druids and bards. Through the Celts the sacredness of places, of wells...'. Rachel describes a

¹⁹³ Harvey, *Animism*, pp. 18-19.

less benevolent aspect of this agency – ‘...We had a smallholding of land and one of the fields contained an energy known as the foidin meara. In this field a person could lose their sense of direction and be led astray through confusion....’. For Ann and Árón, connection with place came alive through the application of folklore and myth:

If there is a folklore story or a poem that is set in a place I know or go to that is of interest to me and informs my knowledge of the place. (Ann)

...Connection with place was informed for me through knowing the Gaelic name of a location. My vicinity now is Ballinrillick, in Gaelic this is Béal Átha an Trí Liag. Translated this is the ford mouth of the three flagstones Irish mythology, stories of the salmon of knowledge, places where legendary figures like Diarmuid, Grainne, Fionn and others inhabited the landscape... (Árón)

Maureen spoke about the historical and folkloric connections she identified in her family’s relocation from the North East of Ireland to their new location in the West linking it to Queen Medb’s legendary journey to steal the sacred bull, Donn Cúailnge, from Ulster (in reverse from West to North East),¹⁹⁵ and her sense of rootedness in the geography of the ley lines, and prehistoric monuments in her local area: ‘...it gives you, maybe a sense of your history...’. Likewise, Eve noted that ‘[t]he experience for me of that [woodland] place is deeply sacred, and it's an experience of connection to my ancestors to place’.¹⁹⁶

Árón referred to the importance of the role language plays in connecting to place:

Remembering the importance of Irish language connecting them to ancestors and the land and a sense of oneness and place in history....and then [it] kind of brought me back remembering people gone before me...or the rocks that are there, the trees that are there...¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ For more information see, Tomas O’Cathasaigh and Matthieu Boyd, ‘Táin Bó Cúailnge And Early Irish Law’, *Coire Sois, The Cauldron of Knowledge: A Companion To Early Irish Saga*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), pp. 219-237.

¹⁹⁶ Interview.

¹⁹⁷ Interview.

These respondents echo Blackie, Whelan and others who have described the importance of reclaiming the Celtic cultural inheritance through place-based connection, as part of a necessary human re-attunement to the natural world.¹⁹⁸

Pre-Celtic and specifically neolithic archaeology particularly, but not entirely, associated with burial sites, was mentioned by several participants as informing their relationship with place:

Burial tombs site locations influence my relationship, in that I see them as places that are generally located in beautiful surrounding and mark a space that hold tradition of ritual and ceremony, for honouring our ancestors and the dead. (Patricia)

The influence of experiences of connection to nature in childhood has already been identified. Existing literature suggests that both childhood experiences of nature¹⁹⁹ and pro-environmental beliefs of childhood caregivers shape environmental attitudes and behaviour in adulthood.²⁰⁰ Four respondents alluded to personal memories of traditions or beliefs gained in childhood and often conveyed through parents or grandparents. For example, Annie recalled that

My Nanny (Grandmother) was very pious in a traditional sense but also very connected to the Otherworld, folk wisdom and also my father was immensely connected to the environment and encouraged us and his students. He would bring the classroom into nature nearly 40 years ago.

Rachel described an abiding belief system originating in childhood: ‘...all things are interconnected and worthy of respect, cherishing, nurturing and compassion. This is the understanding I grew up with...’. Finally, Ben referred to traditional music as a conduit to connection with place and ancestors: ‘My sense of musical ancestry & its traditional legacy can lead me to hear the moods and melodies resonating from places & people that I remember.’

¹⁹⁸ Blackie, *If Women Rose*, pp.13-14

Whelan, *Ever Ancient*, pp. 41-43.

¹⁹⁹ Nancy M. Wells, and Kristi S. Lekies, ‘Nature And The Life course: Pathways From Childhood Nature Experiences To Adult Environmentalism’, *Children, Youth And Environments*, 16.1 (2006), pp 1-24 and Claudio D Rosa and Christiana Cabicieri Profice, and Silvia Collado, Silvia ‘Nature Experiences And Adults’ Self-Reported Pro-Environmental Behaviors: The Role Of Connectedness To Nature And Childhood Nature Experiences’, *Frontiers In Psychology*, 9 (2018), pp. 1-10, [accessed online on 9th July 2025].

²⁰⁰ Chawla, ‘Childhood Experiences’, pp. 144-170.

Twenty-seven references were made to the influence of Christian spirituality/mysticism, other religious traditions and new age beliefs, and shamanistic/animistic beliefs in shaping relationships with favourite nature places and the wider natural environment. Existing research supports the suggestion that spiritual/transpersonal experiences in nature can lead to increased environmental responsibility.²⁰¹ The majority of the references referred to the influence of Christian spirituality and mysticism and this is consistent with nearly three-quarters of participants citing Roman Catholicism as the religious affiliation of their childhood. Three made direct reference to the influence of St. Francis of Assisi (the Roman Catholic patron saint of ecology).²⁰²

I recognise the heart-filling experience as a child when reading about Francis of Assisi and how he addressed nature as family, the moon as sister, the sun as brother, the natural world as community...(Árón).

Rachel points to the historical overlaying of religious cultural influences informing contemporary spiritual practice:

...In more contemporary folklore and folk practice, we have veneration at holy wells, rag trees, respect given to cairns and raths and lone-bushes (hawthorn) in wild places, pilgrimages to places important in both mediaeval Christian religion and 'pagan places' from much earlier times - one overlain on the other, such as the annual Garland Sunday pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick - people have been ascending that mountain for spiritual significance since the Neolithic...

Other religious traditions (such as Sufism, Hinduism, Buddhism, the tradition of Kashmir Shaivism and Taoism) and new age spirituality were referred to nine times as influencing relationship with the wider environment and several participants identified themselves as holding multiple religious and spiritual beliefs, some not grounded in any particular religion. Animistic and shamanistic influences were directly referred to by seven participants, but without elaboration, it was impossible to ascertain whether the influence was Celtic in nature

²⁰¹ Tristan L Snell, and Janette G. Simmonds, "Being In That Environment Can Be Very Therapeutic": Spiritual Experiences In Nature', *Ecopsychology* 4.4 (2012): 326-335, and Annick Hedlund-de Witt 'Pathways To Environmental Responsibility: A Qualitative Exploration Of The Spiritual Dimension Of Nature Experience', *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 7.2 (2013).

²⁰² Pope Francis: *Catholic Teaching On Climate Change*, Catholic Climate Covenant, <<https://catholicclimatecovenant.org/learn/teachings/pope-francis/>> [accessed 30 June 2025].

or arising from the shamanic traditions of Northern European or the American continents. As such, they were treated separately.

Running through participants' recollections is the theme of relatedness, to self and environment through culture, folklore and spirituality. Shaw, a British mythographer has advocated a reconnecting with our mythical stories which he retells using vivid nature imagery as a way to inform our relationship to modern life. He suggests that the purpose of stories is to wake up to a more conscious awareness with the earth we inhabit through a process of relatedness.²⁰³

Environmental beliefs and behaviours: In relation to their worldviews regarding ethical human relationships with the natural environment, only one participant reported that they did not hold beliefs about the relationship between humans and nature. Sixty-three participants viewed the earth's systems or aspects of the natural environment as interconnected and sharing a common life force, imbued with intrinsic value, thus engendering duties to care and protect these systems and elements. Thirty-nine of these attributed a spiritual or sacred intelligence, or personhood to earth as a whole or to its constituents, while three participants particularly referred to the embeddedness and inseparability of humans as part of nature where ethical behaviour is part of this dynamic. For example, Maitiú saw himself as

...part of the ecological place which I inhabit as a living man and interact daily with multiple dúile or natural elements in a creative and non-siloed way for greater health and growth of all dúile. (Maitiú)²⁰⁴

Forty-nine participants indicated that they believed that their environmental behaviours were directly influenced by the emotional bond they had with nature places they were connected with. Fifty-eight believed that they had a deep or reasonably deep understanding of how their actions affected the natural world. In addition, when they were they were asked to select from a menu relating the main ethical positions identified by several authors writing within the environmental ethics tradition,²⁰⁵ a majority identified with dark green or mid-green ethical

²⁰³ Martin Shaw, *Courting The Wild Twin* (Chelsea: Green Publishing, 2020), pp 5-6.

²⁰⁴ In this context the word might translate as the elements, creation, *Dictionary And Language Library*, Teanglann.ie, <<https://www.teanglann.ie/en/fgb/d%c3%baile?flex=frm>> [accessed at on 19th March 2025].

²⁰⁵ For example, Attfield, *Environmental Ethics*, p.12 and Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, p.2.

stances. Thirty-nine identified with an ecocentric, dark-green approach in which the entire ecosystem, including non-living components, has intrinsic value, where humans should prioritise the well-being of the Earth as a whole over individual species or human interests, and eighteen held a biocentric or mid-green stance where all living beings regardless of their capacity to think and feel have an innate value of their own, and should be protected. Similarly, fifty-eight indicated engaging in many different pro-environmental behaviours (Figure 18).

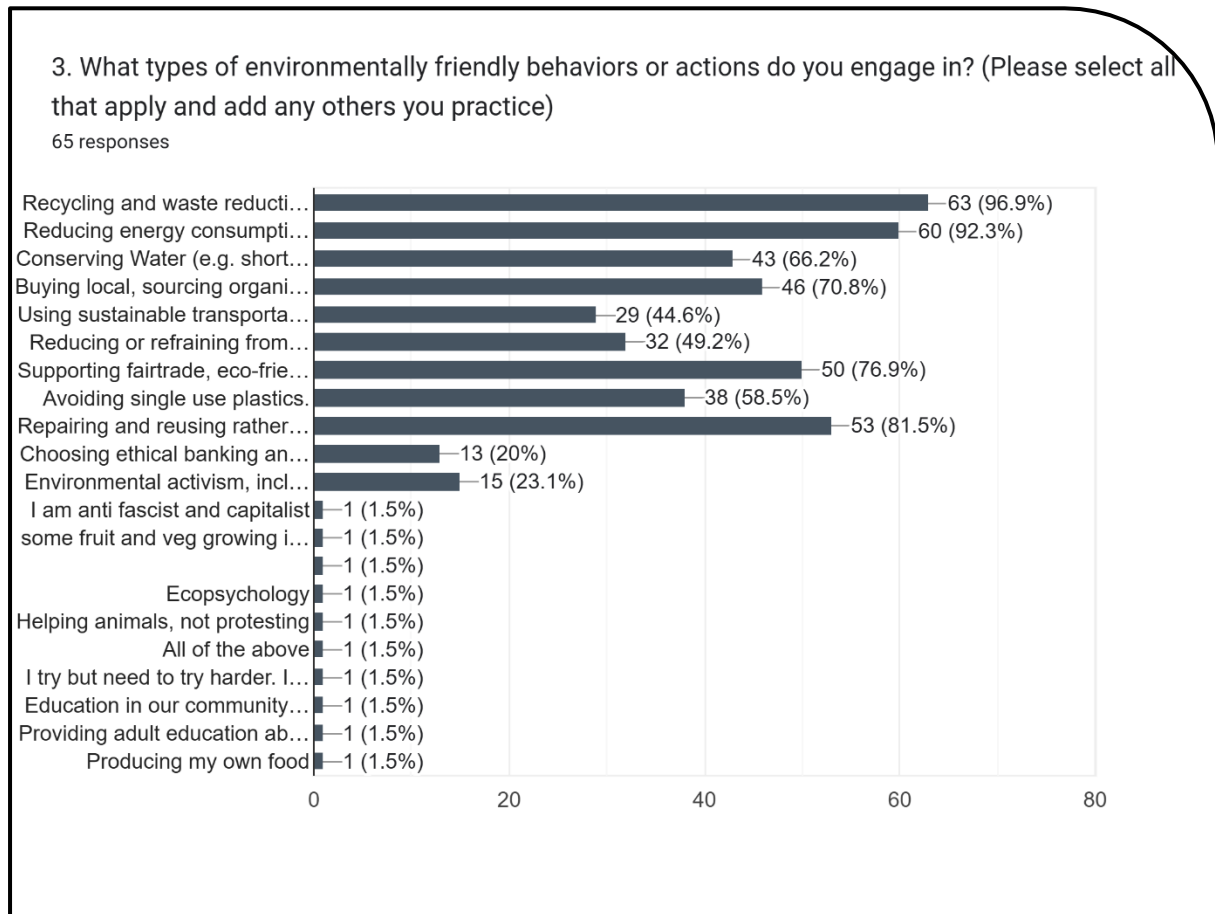


Figure 18

Range of pro-environmental behaviours

The links participants make between their pro-environmental behaviours and their relationship with nature places is supported by the research of Martin,²⁰⁶ Geng²⁰⁷ and Periera.²⁰⁸ Rachel articulated in writing (echoed by two other participants) the practical and emotional difficulties of attending in a meaningful way to pro-environmental behaviour including efforts to grow their own food:

I try but need to try harder. I do recycle carefully, I compost, I try to grow my own including efforts (limited by garden space!); I try to buy local things rather than consumables "with air-miles" where possible, I do occasionally lobby the government ministers and senators to enhance and expand laws for animal and environmental welfare ... I eat a mainly plant-based diet though sometimes do consume animal products and I feel guilty about that. I think to be mindful and adhere to the philosophy of 'Take more than you need' and have respect for a life given or milk or eggs taken...I try to nurture nature in any way I can ... in saving seed and planting...I feed birds, ... and I leave food for animals that need it... I pick up rubbish and... [t]here is so much more I and everyone can do ... always maintain gratitude for the life we have ... and to be mindful that we are not unique or special, we are but one species among many, and the onus is on us to reduce our negative impact on others and to leave place for them in the world, respect their lives, habitats and right to life in a clean, pollutant free, natural environment.

4.2.3 Attunement through reflection, insights and learning

²⁰⁶ Martin, et al, 'Nature Connectedness'.

²⁰⁷ Geng, et al, 'Connections With Nature'.

²⁰⁸ Marybeth Pereira, and Peter Forster, 'The Relationship Between Connectedness To Nature, Environmental Values, and Pro-Environmental Behaviours', *Reinvention: An International Journal Of Undergraduate Research* 8.2 (2015).

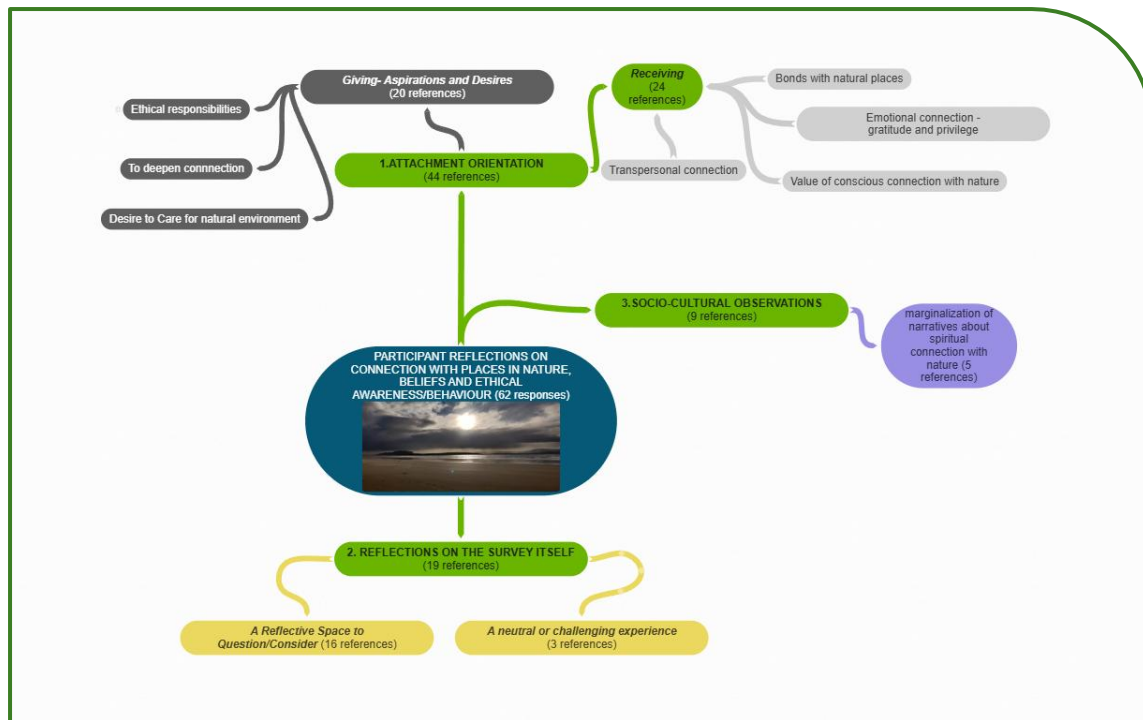


Figure 19
Thematic map of main insights gained by participants

Participants were invited to reflect on their insights on completing the survey: what was most important to them about it and their experience of engaging with it (Figure 19). Combining the feedback from both the sixty-two survey responses and the nine interviews, themes identified as being most relevant for the participants are presented below in descending order of frequency of mentions and stated importance. These were firstly, the centrality of their interest in their personal connection with place, secondly, the importance of history and culture, thirdly, appreciation for time to reflect on relevant issues, fourthly, aspirations and desires and fifthly, reticence to share publicly, spiritual experiences of place-connection.

Firstly, the survey questions concerning connection, belonging and inter-communication with place were of greatest relevance to participants. Twenty-four made reference to the value of human interconnectedness and bonds with particular natural places and the wider environment including the importance of the emotional and spiritual dimensions of these relationships. Some responses inferred the significance of engaging consciously with nature. For example, two participants shared experiences of being drawn by place which was

reminiscent of Lane's axiom – '*place chooses rather than is chosen*'.²⁰⁹ Maureen, speaking about her own connection with where she came to live noted that '...the place attracts the people ... as we used to say, like you're the sum of your surroundings.'²¹⁰ Áróin shared how he and his family were called by a mountain to live in a certain place, and echoing Lane's axiom; '*sacred place is ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary*'²¹¹ described how he continued to converse through a daily morning ritual of greeting this mountain and listening to it:

You know, the land called us. You listened and we listened, and we came. It to me, it is just like we belong here, and just the feeling of the belonging. (Áróin)²¹²

Conversely, Rachel referred to the local and universal nature of place connection, echoing Lane's axiom '*place as centrifugal and centripetal*':²¹³ 'But I certainly think for myself in any environment, I do feel that if I'm alone in a forest, I'm not alone at all...'. Five interviewees were specifically interested in the transpersonal or spiritual dimension of these connections.

Maureen identifies the sacred connection to the place where she felt called to live

...there's an intrigue...no fascination...and you can leave it there, or you can follow it if you want, but...yeah, it's lovely...it's slightly mythical, and...we don't know how much of it is made up...it's just what speaks to you...in some way, and there's a story there. So, it's nice to kind of weave your story into that story.²¹⁴

For Eve, '...what mattered the most was, I think, the invitation to bring out and to share something that's sacred and experienced about the place.'

Many participants reported experiencing positive emotions such as enjoyment, interest, and calm when thinking about their connection with place while completing the survey or speaking during the interview – 'There's a sense of calmness that comes on you, so recalling the memory invokes the delight, invokes peace and that is a good thing to do.' (Sally)²¹⁵.

²⁰⁹ Lane, *Landscapes*, p. 19.

²¹⁰ Interview.

²¹¹ Lane, *Landscapes*, p. 19

²¹² Interview.

²¹³ Lane, *Landscapes*, p. 19.

²¹⁴ Interview.

²¹⁵ Interview.

For Sally, what was most relevant for her about the research was a recognition of the imperative of deconstructing human exceptionalism and a revisioning of humans' place in the world – that the study:

...wasn't just...human centred...this isn't just a piece of research about human beings. This is the human as nature immersed in nature. So, we're connecting to the more-than-human world, and that's vital for our time.²¹⁶

Secondly, a majority of interviewees highlighted the importance of the history, culture, language and ancestry associated with particular places and their own resonance with it, as presented previously.

Rachel articulated her appreciation for folklore and the part it has to play in the wider cultural arena:

I thank you sincerely ... for creating this questionnaire and for giving a voice to "indigenous" western beliefs as in light of various social movements in the last decade or two, these are being seen as "lesser" in value, if 'seen' at all... and ...there is value in our beliefs, our myths, our folklore - it is a record of our human and spiritual experience here.

Thirdly, sixteen participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity the survey provided to take the time to consider, deepen their understanding and articulate issues of relevance to themselves, with the validation this provided for their existing attitudes and priorities.

It made me think about the things that connect me to nature and what influences my actions towards it. (Fiachra)

My main insight is that I have been very lucky and privileged to spend so much time in Nature throughout my life. I'm very grateful. Spending time in nature is part of one's development of one's ethical and moral positioning. (Patricia)

... I feel like this questionnaire has given a 'breathing space' to stop, amid the 'busyness' of life, pause, think and consider and reflect and re-evaluate one's attitudes to nature, to life, to spirituality. (Rachel)

²¹⁶ Interview.

Six months later, when Tricia was asked about the relevance of the research, she replied:

Yes, yes, I remember thinking some of the questions were very relevant...specifically around questions like how do we communicate, how do we develop a dialogical reciprocal relationship with the natural world and how do we receive. (Tricia)²¹⁷

Some interviewees suggested that the interview debriefing itself deepened the opportunity to reflect further through being able to discuss this with me.

I really felt the questions as a gift, you know, that brought me...into myself, you know, and into interconnection...And I really feel there's a loveliness being back in the conversation [again]. (Árón)²¹⁸

Fourthly, nineteen survey participants identified aspirations and desires for themselves or the wider community to begin, maintain or increase their connection with nature places and engagement in conservation and other pro-environmental behaviour:

I wish the land would communicate with me. Maybe I should trust more that I can listen. (Sorcha)

That in 2025 I would like to be more intentional about caring for any enabling aspects of the environment wherein I live - we are guardians to each other. (Laura).

I would like to reduce my usage of single use plastic. (Noelle)

We need to protect and develop more natural places, for everyone. (Pamela)

I wish I were more organized in my activism / efforts to support the environment. (Caitlin)

There are places I have a strong emotional connection to, love and awe etc, but anywhere that is wild nature i feel some connection, and a strong sense of wanting to protect that...' (Aisling)

²¹⁷ Interview.

²¹⁸ Interview.

I feel challenged to bring my actions more in line with my beliefs. (Pricilla)

Two interviewees identified a change in behaviour or understanding since engaging with the survey. Eve wrote in the survey:

That I recognise often the presence and aliveness of many places in nature and I'm more aware, doing this study of there being places of more special bonds and connection. I feel drawn to commit more to these relationships to particular places and to trust rather than try to understand the resonance.

During the interview, she told me that she had followed through on her aspiration to visit more regularly the place she had described in the survey. Onya felt that the idea of place communicating with humans was 'a new enough concept' for her.²¹⁹ She shared how the survey had helped her articulate the link between her embodied 'gut' sense and communications from the natural environment which mirrors the pre-reflective nature of experience, prior to cognition described by Abram and Merlieu-Ponty:²²⁰

There was a sort of an interplay between [my] own instinct, or it felt like...a communication from the place...and I might not have made that connection, except for the research to be honest with you.²²¹

Finally, an unexpected finding from the interviews was the reference five participants made to feeling uncomfortable about discussing issues in public pertaining to spiritual aspects of relationship with place, feeling that they might be ridiculed in some way or that it was a 'sensitive' issue. There is research to support this reticence in Western settings to share experiences viewed as transpersonal and spiritual:²²²

I find I have to be quite careful about who I talk to about spiritual relationships with nature basically because not everybody kind of understands that or you know, or maybe

²¹⁹ Interview.

²²⁰ Abram, *The Spell*, p. 40,
Merlieu Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p. 169.

²²¹ Interview.

²²² John Davis, Linda Lockwood, and Charles Wright, 'Reasons For Not reporting Peak Experiences', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 31.1 (1991), 86-94.
Kate Hunt, 'Understanding The Spirituality Of People', in Grace Davie, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead eds, *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular And Alternative Futures*, (London, Routledge, 2003), pp. 159-169.

we're too, maybe people in general are too cautious. You know that we don't want to be regarded as a bit odd. (Breedge)²²³

It may be that the survey through its anonymity encouraged more disclosure than might otherwise have been the case,²²⁴ and Eve offered some confirmation of this possibility: 'The survey felt like a big invitation to be more honest about what can feel very private sometimes... and they can feel very judged in some contexts...[or] ridiculed or diminished'. She also noted, however, later in the interview that engaging in the survey helped her feel part of a bigger collective of like-minded people:

...realizing...that actually...there's a whole grouping of people, as I'm learning through you, that are really noticing this connection. That's like blowing gentle air in on the embers, and I could really feel more of a collective strengthening of what I know to be precious, but I might override if I was okay, busied up in our external life.²²⁵

When asked how they would like to see the research used, all interviewees wanted to see it presented not only in the academic arena, but more importantly made accessible to the public, maybe in audio-visual form where the aliveness of the subject matter could be better articulated. The feedback on the efficacy of the survey itself indicated fulfilment of one aim of the study as an instrument encouraging human reflection/transformation regardless of the data produced, in line with the philosophy of transpersonal research.²²⁶

²²³ Interview.

²²⁴ Janice L. Hanson, Dorene F. Balmer, and Angelo P. Giardino, , 'Qualitative Research Methods For Medical Educators', *Academic Pediatrics* 11.5 (2011), pp. 375-386.

²²⁵ Interview.

²²⁶ Braud, *An Introduction to Organic*, p.2.

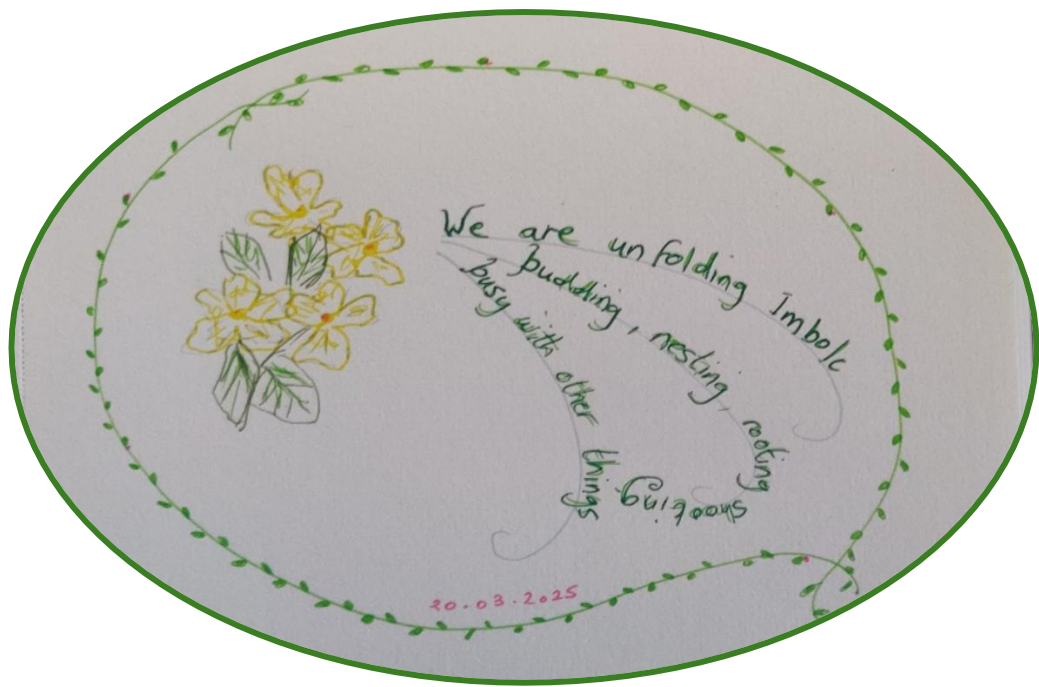


Figure 20
Contemporaneous communication (20.03.2025)

5. CONCLUSION ²²⁷

Write from the feet up, let the earth rise up inside you and guide your mind. Let go of the shackles binding your knowing, let go and let us guide your remembering ²²⁸

The aim of this research was to explore, through the application of a more-than-human transpersonal research methodology, how people in Ireland, an island with its own post-colonial history, experience intersubjective communication with nature places, and how these communication experiences intersect with cultural influences and pro-environmental behaviours. This research project was ambitious in scope, not only exploring how people experience nature communications but also evaluating the efficacy of the more-than-human methodology applied, so as to offer an alignment between the research approach and the subject matter. I anticipated this investigation might illuminate an under-researched topic concerning the phenomenology of intersubjective experiences of nature communications and indigenous beliefs, ethical viewpoints and ways of knowing concerning human-nature place relationships in Western settings. The survey and interview data offered by sixty-five participants was extensive, offering a broad, yet deep depiction of their nature communication experiences and cultural and environmental beliefs and behaviours. This pointed towards ontologies and epistemologies predominantly associated with indigenous cultures in non-western settings.

5.1 CONNECTION WITH NATURE

The deficit in Western cultures concerning embodied connection with nature assumed by Abram, who advocated in his phenomenologically oriented thesis, a need for change in human-

²²⁷ *I received this communication (figure 17) from ☉ today, as an embodied experience of scatteredness with a sense of being pushed away by ☉ in terms of their continued involvement in the research. The intuition was to leave them to engage with the growth and sexing that Imbolc (spring) entails. It is appropriate that I leave them to do this - and for me to get on with the writing, but also at a slower pace so I make time to witness and tend ☉ as required in this time of regeneration.*

²²⁸ *As I begin to re-write this conclusion, I realise I have followed so this advice of ☉ and written freestyle the first version, adding ideas organically without attending to its logical organisation. Now is the time to synthesise this to accommodate academic requirements.*

nature relationships in the West,²²⁹ appears not to be present to any great extent for a majority of participants in this study. They indicated that they had indeed experienced embodied intersubjective communications with nature places, incorporating two interrelated processes identified as *environmental attunement* and *reciprocity*. *Environmental attunement* involved participants' ability to engage in embodied responsiveness with their nature places and the wider environment. Attunement is the medium through which experiences of relational connection and attachment arise both in human settings²³⁰ and between humans and nature.²³¹ All who reported encounters with nature communications were able to identify and describe how they experienced these at the sensorial, visceral, emotional, cognitive and imaginal levels of awareness. All participants reported feeling a connection to a nature place, most indicating a strong connection, suggesting attachment bonds accompanied for many by a sense of belonging, and interpretations of these nature places as predominantly caring and nurturing. Many identified these encounters as spiritual experiences, with most experiencing feelings of awe and wonder. A majority of participants acknowledged they believed in the agency and consciousness of nature places and ecosystems and many of these also indicated belief in their intrinsic sacredness. These responses challenge the cultural stereotype of Western peoples as disenchanting and disconnected from nature. It appears that Ingold may be correct in thinking

...that once we get to know people well – even the inhabitants of nominally Western countries – not one of them turns out to be a full-blooded Westerner, or even to be particularly modern in their approach to life and that the Western tradition of thought, closely examined, is as richly various, multivocal, historically changeable and contest-riven as any other.²³²

In addition, these responses reflect existing narratives in Western philosophy recognising the monistic nature of the cosmos and the influence of phenomenology which locates the source of knowing in embodied experience, embedded in entanglement with a relational world of other relating bodies.²³³

²²⁹ Abram, *The Spell*, pp. 270-271.

²³⁰ Lasher, Margot, 'A Relational Approach To The Human-Animal Bond', *Anthrozoös* 11.3 (1998), pp.130-133.

²³¹ Lindsay, *Embodied Earth*.

²³² Ingold, *The Perception*, p.6.

²³³ Abram, *The Spell*, pp.31-72.

Similarly, while Blackie has alluded to declining connection to nature in Western settings and the need for a reclamation of Celtic narratives,²³⁴ this deficit was less apparent in this study, with participants indicating belief that their connection with nature places and the wider environment had been informed by their cultural and spiritual heritage. This included Celtic spirituality, Irish culture, folklore, language and Christianity. References were made to the importance of connection with childhood nature places and the passing on of cultural themes through parents, grandparents and teachers. Ingold suggests that our capacity to make sense of our direct perceptions of our environment depends on ‘...having things *shown* to us.’²³⁵

Reciprocity, a second theme, comprises giving and receiving. There was a tendency for survey participants to view nature places primarily as sources of benefit or support, rather than as entities requiring mutual exchange or care, with only a small minority pointing to the experience of tending as offering a satisfying sense of connection. Perhaps this reflects a facet of the Western mindset which traditionally views nature as a resource for human benefit. On the other hand, all experiences of nature communication involved a variety of responses that participants spontaneously offered back to these nature places including, tending/tidying, ritual/prayer/healing and avoidance of disturbance. These local encounters also informed their wider pro-environmental beliefs and behaviours: all participants reported holding biocentric or ecocentric ethical stances towards environmental protection and to engaging in a wide range of pro-environmental behaviours, illustrating as Lane suggests the centrifugal and centripetal aspects of connection to place.²³⁶

From these accounts emerge commonalities in worldviews and behaviours signifying an indigenous relational ontology which aligns with a contemporary Celtic worldview. The majority of participants viewed nature as conscious, many as sacred, often attributing personhood to places or its constituents, with most indicating that the natural environment was part of their self-identity. Animistic orientations were evident in designating gender to nature elements (she/they) and in their human-nature attachment behaviours and bonds which showed similarities to inter-human ones. The frequency with which these encounters were imbued with

²³⁴ Blackie, *If Women Rose*, pp.10-13.

²³⁵ Ingold, *The Perception*, p. 21.

²³⁶ Lane, *Landscapes*, p.19.

wonder suggests the possibility that transpersonal experiences in nature were an integrally 'ordinary' part of the lifeworlds of many participants. Perhaps the relational ontology of the participant group might not represent the beliefs and behaviours of the worlds of other groups in Irish society. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the concept of the ontological turn as summarised by Paolo,²³⁷ it could be said these participants are inhabiting a world in a Western setting which is sentient, entangled and imbued with mystery. However, the results also revealed some incongruence between participants' environmental beliefs and aspirations and their current lifestyles echoing previous research on psychotherapy and climate change in Ireland.²³⁸ This reflects the moral dissonance of navigating within a neo-capitalist system that is inherently harmful to the environment.²³⁹ Finally, the participants' relatively homogenous indigenous profile highlights the need for further research in Ireland on nature connectedness among other ethnic groups living in diverse settlement contexts not represented in this study.

These significant findings arose out of a creative collaboration between a human and more-than-human co-researcher and addressed a gap in the existing literature which tends to talk *about* MtH-PR rather than *how*, in a systematic way, it might be attempted.

5.2 ASSESSING METHODOLOGIES: MtH-PR AND TRANSPERSONAL RESEARCH

This research demonstrated how MtH-PR, grounded in a transpersonal methodology orientated towards transformation of all participants, could be successfully applied in a mixed methods study, while encountering some ethical and operational challenges. I highlighted issues concerning ascertaining consent from more-than-human collaborators by including ☺'s interests in the University Application for Ethical Approval. MtH-PR challenges academic institutions to update their ethics policies to extend more-than-human interests from animals to include also flora and abiotic features, such as rocks, weather and water.

²³⁷ Paolo Heywood, 'The Ontological Turn', *Cambridge Encyclopedia Of Anthropology* (2017), [accessed online on 31.05.2025].

²³⁸ Imogen O'Connor, 'Let's Talk about Climate Change: What Psychotherapists Think about Climate Change and Its Relevance to Their Work', *Inside Out*, Issue 101 (Autumn 2023), p 8.

²³⁹ Weintrobe, Sally. 'Moral injury, the culture of uncare and the climate bubble', *Journal of Social Work Practice* 34.4 (2020), p. 352 and Eisenstein, *Climate*, pp.234-236.

Collaborating with ☉ placed considerable emphasis on *process* as opposed to *product* with several implications. It required, as Hodgetts has similarly described,²⁴⁰ a cultivated attunement occupying considerable time, and as Pitt also suggests, an attitude of apprenticeship towards the more-than-human other.²⁴¹ MtH-PR demanded ethical rigor accompanied by a commitment to ongoing reflexivity (clearly evidenced in this study through footnoted observations), so as to facilitate the participation of ☉ at every stage of the research. This included discerning how ☉ wished to be named and the co-creation of a protocol for engagement.²⁴² Collaboration with ☉ had significant impacts: it demonstrated a practical application of MtH-PR methodology, it actively shaped decisions concerning both the sampling method applied, and the centrality of the survey as an instrument of transformation for participants and it resulted in alternative ways of representing more-than-human contributions in the write up. It also highlighted potential tensions between academic requirements and more-than-human interests.

Considering the objective to evoke transformational possibilities for all stakeholders in the research process, there was evidence that this was in part achieved. For most participants, engaging in the research was a positive and relevant experience with many expressing appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on their nature connections and cultural heritage, articulate their views and develop new insights. They identified aspirations for change in their connection with and behaviour towards the natural environment, with two interviewees indicating attitudinal and/or behavioural change which had sustained six months on from survey completion. An unexpected finding was the opportunity participating in the research provided participants to speak openly about the spiritual aspects of their relationships with nature places amidst fears that they might experience misapprehension or ridicule in ordinary social life. All interviewees wanted the research to be shared not only within academia but also in a wider public arena.

²⁴⁰ Hodgetts and Hester, 'How We Nose', p.83.

²⁴¹ Pitt, 'Apprenticeship', p 95.

²⁴² ***On my run today after submitting a second draft and thinking in the wider mind of ☉ I am reminded of something central about their contribution that I overlooked in the conclusion. They want me to remember that they were not just an inspiration but played a part in shaping the methodology not only in relation to developing a protocol but also in the choice of the sampling method used, and the focus on the survey and the focus for the interviews. The footnoted sentence in the text is my re-edit. (11.07.2025)***

My transformation as human co-researcher involved the unexpected development of my own indigenous relational ontology. Firstly, while my upbringing was not grounded in this ontology, the research has changed the way I relate to ☉ from 'land that I own' to conducting myself *as if* ☉ is a more-than-human person comprising many constituent persons. This has transformed the way I relate to them emotionally, spiritually and practically through being-with-and-tending as a way of life that is more intuitively conversational and will continue beyond this research. Secondly, I have come to understand that employing MtH-PR has altered the way I view my own role as researcher. I was surprised to find my methodology closely resembled an indigenous research approach.²⁴³ Wilson suggests that indigenous research is embedded in a relational ontology where the researcher is part of their research and inseparable from the subject of the research and research activity. It acknowledges the validity of localised embodied knowledge arising from relationships and the ethical consequences for relational accountability throughout the research process.²⁴⁴

This mixed method study challenges the frequently cited advantage of qualitative research as being rich and deep in its dive into the detail of interviews. I suggest that depth can also reside in survey material supported by interviews portraying the entanglements of co-researchers and a significant number of participants to create a coherent narrative of shared beliefs, behaviours and desires concerning emotional, spiritual, recreational and tending relationships with nature places and the wider environment (Figure 19).

Finally, while the application of MtH-PR as a methodological paradigm enhanced the rigor of the methods applied to collect, present and analyse the data obtained, the 'context distinction' might address possible academic scepticism. In its basic form, the context of discovery - the creative process of conceiving an idea or theory - is distinguished from the context of justification which seeks to assess and justify it through scientific means.²⁴⁵ If MtH-PR challenges thresholds for academic validation, it could be located within the context of

²⁴³ For example, Alexandra S Dawson, Toombs, Elaine, and Mushquash, Christopher J., 'Indigenous Research Methods: A Systematic Review', *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 8.2 (2017) and Wilson, *Research*.

²⁴⁴ Wilson, *Research*, p.77.

²⁴⁵ Jutta, Schickore, 'Scientific Discovery', in Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), [accessed on 20th May 2025 at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/scientific-discovery/>].

discovery, where it is viewed as a method for generating creative ways of working with more-than-humans. Results can be assessed and validated within the scientific paradigm. This does not preclude other ways of situating this methodology, as I have done, as a valid manifestation of indigenous research.

5.3 RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Firstly, if MtH-PR is to gain credibility in Western settings, research clearly documenting how more-than-human persons are practically engaged with in the research process is required, including methods used to interpret their communications regarding consent and participation. Secondly, as climate change leads to unravelling of existing ecosystems involving large scale movements of human and more-than-human persons, interdisciplinary cross-cultural research concerning how humans attune in adaptive ways to human and more-than-human cultures of place becomes more relevant and urgent. This includes educational initiatives designed to foster environmental attunement to natural places, encouraging affective bonds and development of personal frameworks for ethical engagement with environmental issues. I suggest that one way of attempting this is to foster, in wider conversations or thought experiments, a consideration that the world is inhabited by persons, not all of whom are human. Even if not wholly believed, to engage *as if this were so*, holds potential for radical change at personal, community and institutional levels. Thirdly, the research supports the need for people to have meaningful opportunities for connection with nature spaces, in both urban and rural environments, including engagement with cultural heritages that support this. Unfortunately, Ireland lacks a history of established rights of way, leading restricted access to many places of beauty in private ownership.²⁴⁶ Finally, in line with Little and Derr's research linking human attachment styles to place-based nature attachment, this research points to the importance of nurturing healthy experiences of attachment relationships in childhood, as a foundation for fostering the ability for empathic connection with the wider environment.²⁴⁷ This is part of a larger conversation involving the necessity for redistribution of resources at national and global

²⁴⁶ Keep Ireland Open < <https://www.keepirelandopen.org/>>.

²⁴⁷ Little and Derr, 'The Influence of Nature'.

levels so that families have physical and emotional resources to rear their children in optimal conditions.

This research has uncovered the existence of a contemporary Irish indigenous ontology rooted in culture and reciprocal ways of relating with the natural environment perceived as alive and enchanted. It illustrates how indigenous research can be actualised and presented within a Western academic framework in ways that respect the sacred entwinement of all beings, with aspirations to offer meaningful participation to the more-than-human community who sustain us and who rely on our radical presence to reinstate their rightful place as co-creators of our future communities.



Figure 21

The final word -soundscape of co-researchers, participants and supervisor

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: OUTLINE FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

1. *Information of participant participation*

- Participation in this study may be audio/video recorded, and I agree to this. However, if uncomfortable at any time, you can request that the recording software be switched off. You are entitled to copies of all recordings made and the recording will be deleted once the transcript is taken. The transcripts will be anonymised. Each assigned a pseudonym.
- I am also aware that any information, or recordings collected will be securely stored, and destroyed within three years in line with the Data Protection Acts.
- information may also be used in future academic presentations and publications about this study.
- there is no obligation on me to participate in this study.
- You are free to withdraw my participation at any time without having to explain or give a reason.
- *Email conversations will be deleted once dissertation has been marked.*

2. *What to expect in the interview - duration, semi-structured questions.*

3. *A brief reminder of the survey.*

4. *Semi-Structured Questions*

- (i) What was their experience of interacting with the survey - learnings/ insights, behaviour changes.
 - A. at the time,
 - B. now as they reflect on it – engagement with it led to any lasting changes?
- (ii) Participation:
 - Is there anything they would like to say in relation to the survey or what matters most to them in relation to the survey?
 - Is there some way that they would like their contribution to be used?

- Or some idea of how they would like to participate further?
- (iii) Explanation of the nature of the study involving a more-than-human co-researcher.
 - what do they think/feel about this?
- (iv) Idea about the verbal choral contribution. What would they like to say if they had one or two sentences to convey what matters most to them.
- (v) Debriefing.

APPENDIX 2: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Indigenous wisdom in a Western setting: If Place speaks, can we hear it and if we can, how do we respond?

This survey investigates how we humans discern the interests of the 'more-than-human' natural environment through our personal relationship with places in nature we feel connected to. It seeks to explore how our relationship with place is informed by our cultural and spiritual beliefs and how these beliefs and relationships influence our environmentally related behaviour.



About the researcher and the research.

About Imogen

I am undertaking a Masters in Ecology and Spirituality through the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David and live in Co. Sligo. Over a 20 year period, I have lovingly collaborated with the two acre place I live with to help increase its biodiversity and flourishing through the planting of woodland, meadow and pond habitats.

In this research I am exploring whether it is possible for us to discern when a place or places we treasure might be communicating their interests to us. I ask how we respond to these nudges from the more-than-human community. Does our relationship with places we are connected to influence our environmental beliefs?

For your protection

Confidentiality: In order to protect your confidentiality and anonymity, all information submitted in this questionnaire will be managed and stored in accordance with the ethical research guidelines of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Your email address will be requested only if you are willing to be contacted in relation to participating in in-depth interviews. Your details will be deleted on completion and grading of the research. Any information you give which is used in the research will be anonymised. You can withdraw at any stage from participating in this research by contacting me at the email address provided at the end of this questionnaire.

Consent: By submitting this form, you are indicating your agreement that the details provided can be used in this research project and in any future publications.

Engaging with the questionnaire:

This questionnaire offers an invitation for you to explore your own relationship with a place you are connected with, and your beliefs and behaviours concerning the wider environment. I hope that you will be able to find a comfortable space and some unpressured time to engage with this questionnaire mindfully and in a way that is fulfilling for you. The questionnaire should take around 15-20 minutes to complete.

Please feel free to omit answering any questions you do not wish to. If you are completing this survey on a mobile phone you might like to select landscape mode for ease of viewing.

I thank you for taking the time to participate in this study and hope that you find the questionnaire interesting and informative.

Imogen's woodland and garden in Co. Sligo



Before you begin the questionnaire, you are invited to take a moment to settle. You will be asked questions that may inspire interest and consideration. If you wish, pause to take a full breath inwards and exhale slowly a few times, as you become aware of your body sensations, emotions and thoughts.

Section 1 - Relationship with the environment

This section explores your relationship with a place in nature you feel deeply connected with.

Doneens Trailhead, Co. Leitrim



1. 1. Please think of a place in nature with which you feel a special connection in your life right now.

Where is it located? (If you select 'Other', please state.)

Mark only one oval.

- Leinster (Dublin, Kildare, Kilkenny, Laois, Longford, Louth, Meath, Offaly, Westmeath, Wexford and Wicklow).
- Munster (Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary and Waterford).
- Connaught (Galway, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon and Sligo).
- Ulster (Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Derry/Londonderry, Down, Donegal Fermanagh, Tyrone and Monaghan)
- Other: _____

2. Please indicate which best describes its setting

Mark only one oval.

- Urban.
- Suburban.
- Rural.
- Mixed (urban-rural).

3. In relation to the place you have selected, what best describes its habitat? (If you select 'Other', please state.)

Mark only one oval.

- coastal.
- woodland.
- meadow/bogland.
- Freshwater (river, lake).
- mountain.
- parkland/municipal nature amenity.
- garden.
- Other: _____

4. How connected do you feel with this place?

Mark only one oval.

- Very deeply connected - I feel a strong bond.
- Quite connected - I feel a significant attachment.
- Moderately connected - I have a noticeable but not intense connection.
- Slightly connected - I feel a minimal sense of attachment.
- Not connected - I don't feel any particular bond.

5. **5. Can you share a little about what makes this place special for you?**

6. **6. How long have you had a connection with this place?**

Mark only one oval.

- less than a year.
- 1-3 years.
- 4-6 years.
- 7-10 years.
- More than 10 years.
- Since childhood.

7. **7. How often do you currently visit this place?**

(If you no longer visit the place but did in the past, please select other and specify how often you visited it and how long it has been since you visited it).

Mark only one oval.

- Daily.
- More than one day a week.
- Weekly.
- Monthly.
- A few times a year.
- Once a year.
- Less than once a year.
- Other: _____

8. 8. On average, how long do (or did) you spend at this place during each visit?

Mark only one oval.

- Less than 1 hour.
- 1-2 hours.
- 3-5 hours.
- half a day.
- Full day.
- More than a day.

9. 9. What is (or was) the focus of your relationship with this place? (please select all that apply and if you select 'Other', please state.)

Tick all that apply.

- Tending the land (e.g. gardening, farming, stewardship).
- Recreation (e.g. walking, camping, sport).
- Spiritual (e.g. meditation, ritual).
- Creative (e.g. art, writing, photography).
- Social (e.g. family, community gatherings).
- Healing or therapeutic (e.g. personal reflection, stress relief, rest).
- Education (e.g. learning about nature).
- Place where I live.
- Place where I work.
- Other: _____

10. **10. In relation to the following statement, please select the option that best fits for you:**

"My relationship to this place is an important part of who I am "

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly Agree.
- Agree.
- Unsure.
- disagree.
- strongly disagree.
- Other: _____

11. **11. Have you ever felt that this place communicated with you?**

Mark only one oval.

- Yes.
- No.
- Maybe.

12. **12.** If your answer is **yes** or **maybe** to the above question please answer the following questions in this section. If the answer is **No**, then proceed to section 2 by clicking on **Next** at the end of this section.

Firstly, can you describe a particular instance where you experienced this place communicating with you?

13. 13. When did this experience occur?

Mark only one oval.

- Less than 1 year ago.
- Between 1 and 3 years ago.
- 3-10 years ago.
- 10+ years ago.

14. 14. What element of the place did you feel was communicating with you? (If you select 'Other', please state.)

Tick all that apply.

- Fauna (animals, insects, aquatic life).
- Flora (plants, trees, fungi).
- Non-living natural features (e.g. rocks, water, earth).
- The weather.
- Human-constructed structures.
- The entire ecosystem of the place or part of it.
- Supernatural forces (e.g. fairies or sídhe, spirits, omens).
- Other: _____

15. **15. Please respond to the following statement in relation to communication from place:**

'In the moment, I received the communication through...' (please select all that applies and if you select 'Other', please state.)

Tick all that apply.

- My senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell).
- Visceral, 'gut' awareness (e.g. muscular tension and relaxation, heart-rate, breath, nervous system).
- Feelings, (e.g. gratitude, awe, fear, excitement).
- Thoughts/ideas.
- Imagination (images, dreams, altered states).
- Divining tools.
- Other: _____

16. **16. Did this communication result in you responding spontaneously in any of the following ways? (please select any that apply and if you select 'Other', please state.)**

Tick all that apply.

- Emotional response (e.g. joy, sadness, awe, fear).
 - Physical movement (e.g. walking, running, dancing).
 - Verbal response (e.g. singing, sighing, chanting).
 - Creative expression (drawing, writing, composing).
 - Tending action (cleaning up, repairing, gardening).
 - Ritual/Spiritual (prayer, meditation, offering).
 - Somatic/body response (e.g. crying, sighing, shaking)
 - Avoiding disturbance/withdrawing (e.g. leaving the place alone, avoiding disturbance of wildlife).
 - _____
- Other:

17. **17. To what extent to you agree or disagree with the following statement:**

'I felt a sense of awe or wonder after my experience of place communicating its interests.'

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree - I felt a powerful sense of awe or wonder.
- Somewhat agree - I felt moments of awe or wonder.
- Neutral - I am unsure if I felt awe or wonder.
- Disagree - I didn't feel much awe or wonder.
- Strongly disagree - I didn't feel any awe or wonder

18. **18. In relation to the following statement please select the option that best applies to you -**

"Experiences of communicating with nature have influenced my knowledge about the natural world".

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree.
- Agree.
- Unsure.
- Disagree.
- Strongly disagree.

Section 2 - Beliefs about the relationship between humans and nature

This section explores your personal beliefs about your relationship with the natural environment

Imogen's garden with Megalithic tomb in background



19. **1. In relation to the following statement, please select the option that best applies to you:**

"I feel very connected to all living things and the earth".

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree.
- Agree.
- Unsure.
- Disagree.
- Strongly disagree.

20. **2. Which of the following statements best describes your connection with nature. (If you select 'Other', please state.)**

Mark only one oval.

- I understand the Earth as a self-regulating, complex system, and while I don't attach spiritual meaning to it, I respect and value it immensely.
- I view the Earth as a sacred, living, conscious entity which should be cherished and protected.
- I perceive all living and non-living entities as interconnected, sharing a natural life force and thus worthy of care and protection.
- I believe that all of nature including its living and non-living beings can be viewed as possessing spiritual intelligences or personhood, and I feel a kinship with and duty to protect and care for all these beings.
- I don't hold any beliefs about the relationship between humans and nature.
- Other: _____

21. **3. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "*The natural environment can express its own needs and interests in ways that humans can perceive*"**

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree.
- Agree.
- Unsure.
- Disagree.
- Strongly disagree.

22. **4. Which of the following statements best reflects your view on the ethical relationship between humans and the natural environment?**

Mark only one oval.

- Humans have the most important role, and nature should be valued primarily for its usefulness to human beings.
- The environment should be protected and conserved to maintain human well-being and the resources needed for current and future generations.
- Animals with the ability to experience sensations and emotions have intrinsic value, and humans should act to protect these creatures.
- All living beings (for example, plants and animals) regardless of their capacity to think and feel have an innate value of their own, and humans should protect their rights and well-being.
- The entire ecosystem, including non-living components, has intrinsic value, and we should prioritize the well-being of the Earth as a whole over individual species or human interests.

23. **5. I mostly ascertain the interests of the non-human environment through the following methods....**

(Please select those that apply to you. If you select other, please state.)

Tick all that apply.

- Scientific knowledge.
- Intuition.
- Spiritual guidance/prayer.
- Cultural traditions and folklore.
- Direct experience of communication from the environment.
- Religious or spiritual teachings.
- Observation and practical experience.
- Reasoning or logic.
- I cannot ascertain the interests of the non-human environment.
- Other: _____

24. **6. Can you identify any spiritual beliefs, cultural traditions or folklore, that have had a particular influence on your own relationship with places in nature and the wider environment in general?**

Section 3 - Environmental ethics and behaviour

This section explores how your relationship with place and your beliefs inform your behaviour towards nature.



25. **1. How true is the following statement for you -**

"I have a deep understanding of how my actions affect the natural world".

Mark only one oval.

- Completely true
- Mostly true.
- Neither true nor untrue.
- Mostly untrue.
- Completely untrue.

26. **2. How often do you engage in environmentally friendly practices?**

Mark only one oval.

- Very Often.
- Often.
- Sometimes.
- Rarely.
- Almost never.

27. **3. What types of environmentally friendly behaviors or actions do you engage in? (Please select all that apply and add any others you practice)**

Tick all that apply.

- Recycling and waste reduction.
- Reducing energy consumption (e.g. using energy efficient appliances, turning off appliances when not in use)
- Conserving Water (e.g. shorter showers, water saving devices).
- Buying local, sourcing organic products.
- Using sustainable transportation (e.g. public transport, car pooling, cycling).
- Reducing or refraining from meat or animal product consumption.
- Supporting fairtrade, eco-friendly businesses and ethically sourced products and services.
- Avoiding single use plastics.
- Repairing and reusing rather than discarding and replacing.
- Choosing ethical banking and investment options.
- Environmental activism, including animal welfare (campaigning, protesting).
- Other: _____

28. **4. "My environmental behaviours are directly influenced by the emotional bond I have with places in nature I am connected with".**

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree.
- Agree.
- Unsure.
- Disagree.
- Strongly disagree.

29. **5. To what extent do your spiritual and/or ethical beliefs about the responsibilities of humans towards nature influence your environmental behaviours?**

Mark only one oval.

- Very significantly.
- Significantly.
- Moderately.
- Slightly.
- Not at all.

30. **6. How often the is following statement true for you:**

"My personal wants and goals coincide with what I feel would benefit the natural environment".

Mark only one oval.

- Always.
- Often.
- Sometimes.
- Rarely.
- Never.

Section 4 - About You

31. **1. What gender do you identify with? (If you select 'Other', please state.)**

Mark only one oval.

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
-

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Genderqueer/Genderfluid

Prefer not to say

Other: _____

32. **2. Age**

Mark only one oval.

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+
- Prefer not to say.

33. **3. How in general do you spend your day. (Please select the option(s) that best describe your primary work or activities and if you select 'Other', please state.)**

Tick all that apply.

- Caring for others (e.g., children, elderly, social care).
- Research and Education (e.g., teaching, studying, reading, academic research).
- Service work (e.g., hospitality, retail, customer service).
- Community or social work (e.g. volunteering, activism, social services).
- Business or administration (e.g. office management, finance, marketing).
- Creative work (e.g. arts, music, crafts).
- Working with nature or outdoors (e.g. animal care, farming, gardening, environmental conservation).
- Technical or skilled work (e.g., IT, engineering, design).
- Medical, healthcare or physical therapies (e.g. nursing/doctor, counselling/therapy, physical therapy, fitness, holistic health).
- Manual work (e.g. construction, maintenance, skilled trades).
- Religious or spiritual work (e.g. spiritual guidance, clergy, psychic guidance).
- Transport, delivery, or driving (e.g., couriers, logistics, public transport).
- Prefer not to say.
- Other: _____

34. 4. Where do you live? (If you select 'Other', please state.)

Mark only one oval.

- Ulster.
- Munster.
- Connaght .
- Leinster.
- Prefer not to say.
- Other: _____

35. 5. What type of environment do you live in?

Mark only one oval.

- Urban.
- Surburban.
- Rural.
- Mixed - (urban-rural).

36. 6. How long have you been living there?

Mark only one oval.

- less than a year
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-10 years
- More than 10 years

37. **7. Where did you spend most of your childhood (up until age 12)?**

Please state country and region.

38. **8. What type of environment did you grow up in?**

Mark only one oval.

- Urban.
- Suburban.
- Rural.
- Mixed - (urban-rural).

39. **9. How would you identify your cultural background? (please tick those that apply, and if you choose 'Other', please state.)**

Tick all that apply.

- Irish (including Gaelic/Irish heritage).
- Irish Traveller.
- Northern Irish
- British.
- Other European.
- African.
- Asian
- Mixed Ethnic Background
- Prefer not to say.
- Other: _____

40. **10. Religious affiliation. Which best describes your childhood religious or philosophical affiliation? (If you select 'Other', please state.)**

Mark only one oval.

- Roman Catholic.
- Other Christian (e.g., Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox).
- Celtic Christian.
- Celtic Pagan.
- Muslim.
- Jewish.
- Buddhist.
- Indigenous/Shamanic.
- Humanist.
- Spiritual.
- Agnostic.
- No affiliation.
- Other: _____

41. **11. Religious affiliation. Which best describes your current religious or philosophical worldview? (If you select 'Other', please state.)**

Mark only one oval.

- Roman Catholic.
- Other Christian (e.g., Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox).
- Celtic Christian.
- Celtic pagan.
- Muslim.
- Jewish.
- Buddhist.
- Indigenous/Shamanic.
- Spiritual.
- Humanist.
- Agnostic.
- No particular worldview.
- Prefer not to say.
- Other: _____

42. **12. I would invite you to take a moment to observe your thoughts, emotions and body sensations.**

As you reflect on your relationship with natural places you feel connected to and your beliefs and ethical behaviour in relation to nature, what might be the main insight that you are taking away with you as you reach the end of this questionnaire?

43. **13. "Engaging with this questionnaire has helped me to think more deeply about my relationship with the natural environment and how I care for it".**
(please select the option that is most true for you).

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree.
- Agree.
- Unsure.
- Disagree.
- Strongly disagree.

Section 5. Follow-up interview

You can opt to be contacted to participate in a longer interview to explore in more depth your experiences with places in nature you are connected to and your beliefs and behaviours towards the wider environment.

44. **I am willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview**

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

45. **If the answer is 'yes' to a follow-up interview, you are invited to give your contact details below. If the answer is 'no', please proceed to the final section to submit.**

46. **1. Name.**

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47. **2. Email address.**

48. **3. Please confirm email address.**

Section 6 - Thank you.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. I hope you experienced it as interesting and worthwhile. This study has been designed to reach as wide a range of people as possible, and you are invited, if you are willing, to share the questionnaire with one or more of your own contacts, using the link below.

<https://forms.gle/9gKu1hGXEDKrzCGb6>

If you have found any part of this experience distressing, I encourage you to seek help from your support network.

If you have any questions, or need to debrief after completing this questionnaire, you can contact me, Imogen O'Connor, by email at **2204717@student.uwtsd.ac.uk**. You may also contact me via this email address if you would like access to a copy of the dissertation once it has been assessed.