

Ecospirituality: A New Pathway to Cope with Students' Depression, Anxiety and Stress

A Synopsis of PhD Thesis

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CHAPTER OUTLINE

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CHAPTER – I CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This chapter introduces the concept of ecospirituality, key principles of ecospirituality, issues of ecospirituality and depression, anxiety, stress among students, and rationale of the present study.

Introduction

The spiritual perspective on nature can be juxtaposed with the instrumental perspective on nature which regards nature as a tool to be used for solely anthropocentric utilities. This cost-benefit analysis is incongruent with a spiritual perspective on nature, as determinations regarding its conservation or utilisation are not substantiated by logical cost-benefit analysis but rather influenced by core convictions about morality (Skitka et al., 2005, 2021). Ecospirituality encompasses beliefs and actions that recognise the spiritual importance of nature and the inherent spiritual connection between humans and the natural world.

Mental health is an essential component of one's entire state of well-being. The involvement in natural surroundings has played a crucial role throughout history in shaping mental health care, with contemporary theoretical perspectives emphasising its importance in healthcare. Wilson's Biophilia Hypothesis, proposed in 1984, posits that humans have an innate need to form connections with other living organisms. On the other hand, Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory, introduced in 1995, suggests that nature can enhance well-being by improving our ability to focus our attention. Shinrin-Yoku, also known as forest bathing, is a customary Japanese ritual that entails thoroughly engaging with nature by consciously utilising all five senses (Hansen et al., 2017). There has been a growing interest in these principles over time, which has resulted in the

development of the modern idea of "green prescription" or the practice of spending time in nature to promote well-being and alleviate illness (Jepson et al., 2010). The use of nature-based activities in mental health care has shown promising results. Research has explored how engaging with nature can help to alleviate stress (Marselle et al., 2019) and decrease excessive thinking (Lopes, 2020). Applications have encompassed the utilisation of outdoor mindfulness, as demonstrated by Djernis et al. (2019), and the incorporation of nature participation as a supplementary component in conventional return-to-work rehabilitation, as explored by Sahlin et al. (2015).

Concept of Ecospirituality

Ecospirituality is the expression of the spiritual bond between humans and the environment. According to Sunganthi (2019), ecospirituality can be defined as the practice of treating the environment with reverence and care while living within its boundaries. The concepts associated with this definition encompass experiencing a sense of unity with the universe, valuing one's environment, recognising the potential consequences of disrupting the ecosystem's equilibrium, comprehending the ethical aspects, safeguarding, and preserving nature, and appreciating the wonder of comprehending the ecosystem.

There are number of thoughts in several bodies of literature from Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism, which can be associated to the concept of ecospirituality.

Key principles of Ecospirituality

Ecospirituality can be characterised by five principles: tending, dwelling, reverence, connectedness, and sentience (Lincoln, 2000).

➤ Tending

Tending is a dynamic aspect of connection, encompassing the act of taking care of oneself to be capable of taking care of others.

➤ Dwelling

Dwelling is the act of coexisting with both the visible and invisible aspects of existence.

➤ Reverence

Reverence is a deep and physical feeling of respect and admiration for the sacred and awe-inspiring, rooted in the understanding that humanity is intimately connected to and part of the earth.

➤ Connectedness

Connectedness is a notion that pertains to ecospiritual encounters, characterised by an inherent connection with the cosmos and the perception that the profound enigma of existence permeates every individual component of the universe.

➤ Sentience

Cummings (1991) suggests that humans live a magical life in a magical universe. We can perceive and describe this amazement through the nature of sentience.

Ecospirituality and depression, anxiety, stress among students

Higher education students encounter a multitude of problems and pressures, such as academic rigour, peer influence, forming new social connections, unfamiliar subjects,

anxiety about meeting expectations, poor academic performance, concerns about future career prospects, financial strain, and feelings of isolation (Mofatteh, 2021). During this period, individuals may experience mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, and depression.

Research indicates that spending time in nature has positive effects on both mental and physical well-being. These benefits include a decrease in stress, depression, and anxiety, as well as an enhancement in healing rates (Robbins, 2020). Research repeatedly shows that embracing spirituality is associated with improved psychological health and wellbeing (Labbe & Fobes, 2010). Kamitsis et al. (2013) proposed that spirituality can have a substantial impact on the beneficial outcomes resulting from interacting with nature and one's psychological well-being. Thus, ecospirituality which is rooted in a strong belief in the sacredness of nature and combines spirituality with the environment, can have a substantial impact on alleviating depression, anxiety, and stress among students.

The rationale of this study

In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature in philosophy and psychology focused on ecospirituality. This field aims to define ecospirituality, create tools for measuring it, and explore its connection to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and stress. These efforts are motivated by the significant challenges of mental health issues faced by society in various aspects of life, due to population growth, increased work demands, and other factors. Hence, to maintain optimal mental well-being and effectively manage conditions such as depression, anxiety, and stress, it is imperative that we cultivate the qualities associated with ecospirituality. Students at

higher education level face various adversities in various aspects of life. Ecospirituality could be the healing construct against their psychological distress. To determine the prevalence of ecospirituality among higher education students and whether it can effectively address their mental health concerns i.e. depression, anxiety, and stress, it is crucial to analyse these phenomena within a scientific framework. The current study provides a rationale for investigating the presence and magnitude of ecospirituality, as well as depression, anxiety, and stress levels among students in higher education.

CHAPTER II THE PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

This chapter describes an overview of the literature review, research problem, delimitations, major research questions, objectives, and hypotheses that have guided the researcher in pursuing the research.

In order to perform a comprehensive study of previous research in this particular topic, the researcher initially identified both theoretical and empirical papers pertaining to ecospirituality and depression, anxiety, stress. Subsequently, the focus was limited down to studies specifically undertaken in the realm of education and higher education. The researcher looked into the primary research databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, ERIC, ScienceDirect, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), JSTOR, and PsycINFO. The researcher selected a total of 153 database entries, and from these, the researcher reviewed eight relevant studies (from 2002 to 2021) on spirituality and mental health, twenty relevant studies (from 2000 to 2023) on ecospirituality, and thirty-two studies (from 2007 to 2022) on depression, anxiety, stress to identify the knowledge gap for the current study.

Statement of the Problem

There is a scarcity of study on the topic of assessing the influence of higher education students' ecospirituality on their depression, anxiety, and stress. Therefore, it can be inferred that researchers have yet to address the void in the current knowledge base of this specific topic. The present researcher also identified that there have been no studies undertaken on this specific topic in India, particularly in West Bengal.

To fill the knowledge gap, the researcher has identified the research problem- ***"The relationship between higher education students' ecospirituality and their depression, anxiety, stress."***

Delimitations

The study was delimited to the following-

- a) The study was conducted only in West Bengal.
- b) The population and sample were delimited to current students of academic session 2023-24 at higher education level (i.e., undergraduate students, postgraduate students).
- c) Very few social-demographic characteristics (Gender, Age, Habitat, Family Type, Religion, Social Category) of the participants were considered, along with their basic academic details (Course Level, Stream of Study).
- d) Ecospirituality and depression, anxiety, stress, were measured using self-reported questionnaires only.
- e) The study did not take into account the scores of individual dimensions in the Ecospirituality Scale. Instead, it measured the ecospirituality construct by considering the total score of the all twenty items in the Ecospirituality Scale.
- f) Only 1289 students from 26 colleges and 10 universities were included in this study.

Research Questions

In order to explore the identified research problem, research questions of the present study were specified as-

- a. What is the prevalence of ecospirituality among higher education students?

- b. Whether socio-demographic, and academic factors result in variation in the higher education students' ecospirituality?
- c. What are the levels of depression, anxiety and stress among higher education students?
- d. Whether socio-demographic and academic factors are related to higher education students' depression, anxiety and stress?
- e. Whether the higher education students' ecospirituality is related to their depression, anxiety and stress?

Objectives

Based on the research questions following objectives were identified-

- a) To check the prevalence of ecospirituality among higher education students.
- b) To check for variation in ecospirituality of the higher education students with respect to their socio-demographic and academic factors.
- c) To check the levels of depression among higher education students.
- d) To investigate the associations between levels of depression and socio-demographic characteristics (Gender, Age, Habitat, Family Type, Religion, Social Category) as well as academic characteristics (Course Level, Stream of Study) of the higher education students.
- e) To check the levels of anxiety among higher education students.
- f) To investigate the associations between levels of anxiety and socio-demographic characteristics (Gender, Age, Habitat, Family Type, Religion, Social Category) as well as academic characteristics (Course Level, Stream of Study) of the higher education students.
- g) To check the levels of stress among higher education students.

- h) To investigate the associations between levels of stress and socio-demographic characteristics (Gender, Age, Habitat, Family Type, Religion, Social Category) as well as academic characteristics (Course Level, Stream of Study) of the higher education students.
- i) To find out the relationship between ecospirituality and depression among higher education students.
- j) To find out the relationship between ecospirituality and anxiety among higher education students.
- k) To find out the relationship between ecospirituality and stress among higher education students.

Hypotheses

Based on the research objectives, following null hypotheses were constructed-

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in Ecospirituality Score of the students in terms of Gender.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between Ecospirituality Score and Age of the students.

H₀₃: There is no significant difference in Ecospirituality Score of the students in terms of Habitat.

H₀₄: There is no significant difference in Ecospirituality Score of the students in terms of Family Type.

H₀₅: There is no significant difference in Ecospirituality Score of the students in terms of Religion.

H₀₆: There is no significant difference in Ecospirituality Score of the students in terms of Social Category.

H₀7: There is no significant difference in Ecospirituality Score of the students in terms of Course Level.

H₀8: There is no significant difference in Ecospirituality Score of the students in terms of Stream of Study.

H₀9: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Depression and Gender of the students.

H₀10: There is no significant relationship between Depression Score and Age of the students.

H₀11: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Depression and Habitat of the students.

H₀12: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Depression and Family Type of the students.

H₀13: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Depression and Religion of the students.

H₀14: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Depression and Social Category of the students.

H₀15: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Depression and Course Level of the students.

H₀16: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Depression and Stream of Study of the students.

H₀17: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Anxiety and Gender of the students.

H₀18: There is no significant relationship between Anxiety Score and Age of the students.

H₀19: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Anxiety and Habitat of the students.

H₀20: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Anxiety and Family Type of the students.

H₀21: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Anxiety and Religion of the students.

H₀22: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Anxiety and Social Category of the students.

H₀23: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Anxiety and Course Level of the students.

H₀24: There is no significant difference in Anxiety Score in terms of Stream of Study of the students.

H₀25: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Stress and Gender of the students.

H₀26: There is no significant relationship between Stress Score and Age of the students.

H₀27: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Stress and Habitat of the students.

H₀28: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Stress and Family Type of the students.

H₀29: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Stress and Religion of the students.

H₀30: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Stress and Social Category of the students.

H₀31: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Stress and Course Level of the students.

H₀32: There is no significant relationship between Levels of Stress and Stream of Study of the students.

H₀33: There is no significant relationship between Ecospirituality Score and Depression Score of the students.

H₀34: There is no significant relationship between Ecospirituality Score and Anxiety Score of the students.

H₀35: There is no significant relationship between Ecospirituality Score and Stress Score of the students.

Chapter III Method and Procedure

The Method and Procedure chapter depicts an overall picture of the research design and its implementation by the researcher.

Study Design

The researcher initiated a mixed mode survey (mostly 'paper and pencil survey' and few 'web-based survey') in the all twenty-three districts in West Bengal. Purposive sampling technique was used in this study. The research approach of the study was fundamentally quantitative along with qualitative explanations.

The current students (academic session 2023 – 2024) studying in various undergraduate courses and the present students studying in different postgraduate courses at colleges and universities in West Bengal were the target population of the study. The sample size of this current research was 1289. Through purposive sampling technique, the students of the sample were selected from twenty-three districts in West Bengal.

Variables

The socio-demographic variables included six variables i.e., Gender, Age, Habitat, Family Type, Religion, Social Category. The academic variables included two variables i.e., Course Level, Stream of Study. Here, the construct ecospirituality was measured by the variable Ecospirituality Score that was obtained from Ecospirituality Scale constructed by Suganthi in 2019. Likewise, the constructs depression, anxiety, and stress were measured by the variables namely Levels of Depression, Levels of Anxiety, and Levels of Stress respectively obtained from the scores in DASS-21 constructed by Lovibond and Lovibond in 1995.

Table 1
Distribution of Sample data based on the explanatory variables

Variable / Level	Number of Students	Percentage within Sample
Gender		
Female	936	72.6%
Male	353	27.4%
Age		
Range (18years to 25years)	1289	100%
Habitat		
Panchayat	784	60.8%
Municipality	441	34.2%
Municipal Corporation	64	5%
Family Type		
Nuclear Family	972	75.4%
Joint Family	317	24.6%
Religion		
Hinduism	1007	78.1%
Islam	238	18.5%
Christianity	44	3.4%
Social Category		
Unreserved	556	43.13%
Scheduled Caste	330	25.6%
Scheduled Tribe	75	5.82%
Other Backward Class	328	25.45%
Course Level		
Undergraduate	849	65.9%
Postgraduate	440	34.1%
Stream of Study		
Science	127	9.9%
Humanities	1065	82.6%
Commerce	38	2.9%
Engineering	59	4.6%

Tools for Data Collection

To collect data from each student, the present study used one information schedule about the student, the Ecospirituality Scale constructed by Suganthi (2019), and the DASS-21 constructed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995).

Data Tabulation, Cleaning, and Analyses

A total of 1325 (281 + 1044) students at higher education level responded to the data tools administered in the present study. Data of 1044 students in web-based survey, was imported from Google Form to Google Sheet, and then in Microsoft Excel sheet. Among them, 21 students did not complete the questionnaire properly or provided multiple inputs. Data of 281 students in paper-pencil survey was manually tabulated by the researcher, in the same Microsoft Excel sheet. Among them, 15 students from paper and pencil survey did not complete the questionnaire properly or provided multiple inputs. Therefore, these 36 (21 + 15) responses were excluded from the study. The remaining 1289 participants' data was regarded as the final sample data in this study. The cleaned final data file was then imported to IBM SPSS, and IBM AMOS to run the statistical analyses.

Chapter IV Analysis and Interpretation

The study examined both descriptive data and inferential conclusions. To begin with descriptive statistics, the mean and standard deviation were calculated. These values were then utilised in parametric inferential statistics such as Student's t-test (for equal variance), Welch's t-test (for unequal variance), one-way ANOVA, and so on. Prior to doing each inferential test, the Shapiro-Wilk test was performed to assess the normality of the data. If the normality of the data could not be determined, non-parametric test was performed. The study employed Spearman Correlation analyses to identify connections between ecospirituality and depression, ecospirituality and anxiety, as well as ecospirituality and stress. Subsequently, the extents of the relationships were justified by path analysis models.

In this chapter, the following significant findings were established-

- Female students had statistically significant slightly higher mean score than Male students in overall Ecospirituality Score.
- A statistically significant weak negative correlation was found between the Ecospirituality Score of higher education students and their Age.
- Students from habitat Municipality had statistically significant slightly higher mean score than students from Panchayat, and from Municipal Corporation in overall Ecospirituality Score.
- Students from religion Hinduism had statistically significant slightly higher mean score than students from Islam, and from Christianity in overall Ecospirituality Score.

- Students from Unreserved category had statistically significant slightly higher mean score than students from Scheduled Caste, from Scheduled Tribe, and from Other Backward Class in overall Ecospirituality Score.
- Undergraduate students had statistically significant slightly higher mean score than Postgraduate students in overall Ecospirituality Score.
- Humanities students had statistically significant slightly higher mean score than Science, Commerce, and Engineering students in overall Ecospirituality Score.
- A statistically significant weak positive correlation was found between the Depression Score of higher education students and their Age.
- Statistically significant, a moderate relationship was found between Levels of Depression and Habitat. Students in Municipal Corporation were more inclined towards Severe category, whereas students in Panchayat and students in Municipality were more inclined towards Moderate category.
- Statistically significant, a moderate relationship was found between Levels of Depression and Religion. Students from Christianity were more inclined towards Severe category, whereas students from Hinduism and students from Islam were more inclined towards Moderate category.
- Statistically significant, a moderate relationship was found between Levels of Depression and Social Category. Students from Scheduled Tribe were more inclined towards Severe category, whereas students from Unreserved category, students from Scheduled Caste, and students from Other Backward Class were more inclined towards Moderate category.
- Statistically significant, a strong relationship was found between Levels of Depression and Course Level. Postgraduate students were more inclined

towards Severe category, whereas Undergraduate students were more inclined towards Moderate category.

- Statistically significant, a moderate relationship was found between Levels of Depression and Stream of Study. Humanities students were more inclined towards Moderate category, whereas Science students, Commerce students, and Engineering students were more inclined towards Severe category.
- Statistically significant, a moderate relationship was found between Levels of Anxiety and Gender. Though Female and Male students had almost same pattern of inclination in Extremely Severe, Severe, and Moderate category; they differed in the rest two categories. Female students had same counts in both Mild as well as Normal category. But in the case of Male students, Normal category came last, just after the Mild category.
- A statistically significant weak positive correlation was found between the Anxiety Score of higher education students and their Age.
- Statistically significant, a moderate relationship was found between Levels of Anxiety and Habitat. Though the students in three groups of the Habitat, had higher inclination towards Extremely Severe category; they differed in their lower inclination. Students in Panchayat, and students in Municipality had lower inclination towards Mild, and Normal category. Students in Municipal Corporation had lower inclination towards Moderate, Mild, Normal and Severe category.
- Test revealed that though there was variation in the distribution of Levels of Anxiety across the categories of Family Type, the difference was not statistically significant.

- Statistically significant, a moderate relationship was found between Levels of Anxiety and Religion. Though the students in three groups of the Religion, had higher inclination towards Extremely Severe category; they differed in their lower inclination. Students from Hinduism, and students from Islam had lower inclination towards Mild, and Normal category. Students from Christianity had lower inclination towards Normal and Moderate category.
- Statistically significant, a moderate relationship was found between Levels of Anxiety and Social Category. Though the students in four groups of the Religion, had higher inclination towards Extremely Severe category; they differed in their least inclination. Students in Unreserved group had least inclination towards Mild category, whereas students in Scheduled Caste, students in Scheduled Tribe, and students in Other Backward Class, had lower inclination towards Normal category.
- Statistically significant, a strong relationship was found between Levels of Anxiety and Course Level. Though Undergraduate and Postgraduate students had almost same pattern of inclination in Extremely Severe, Severe, and Moderate category; they differed in the rest two categories. Postgraduate students had same counts in both Mild as well as Normal category. But in the case of Undergraduate students, Normal category came last, just after the Mild category.
- In case of Anxiety Score, Science students as well as Engineering students had statistically significant higher mean score than Humanities students.
- A statistically significant weak positive correlation was found between the Stress Score of higher education students and their Age.

- Statistically significant, a moderate relationship was found between Levels of Stress and Habitat. Students in Municipal Corporation were more inclined towards Severe category, whereas students in Panchayat and students in Municipality were more inclined towards Moderate category.
- Statistically significant, a strong relationship was found between Levels of Stress and Course Level. Among Undergraduate students, Moderate stress was the most prevalent, followed by Mild, Severe, Normal, and Extremely Severe stress. Whereas among Postgraduate students, Moderate stress was the most prevalent, followed by Severe, Normal, Mild, and Extremely Severe stress.
- Statistically significant, a moderate relationship was found between Levels of Stress and Stream of Study. Science students as well as Humanities students showed the highest inclination in Moderate category. On the other hand, Commerce students, and Engineering students showed highest inclination in Severe category.
- A statistically significant strong negative correlation was found between the Ecospirituality Score of higher education students and their Depression Score.
- For one unit increase in Ecospirituality Score, Depression Score dropped by 0.162 units.
- A moderate level of explanatory power for the variance in the Depression Score was revealed by the Ecospirituality Score.
- A statistically significant strong negative correlation was found between the Ecospirituality Score of higher education students and their Anxiety Score.

- For one unit increase in Ecospirituality Score, Anxiety Score dropped by 0.160 units.
- A moderate level of explanatory power for the variance in the Anxiety Score was revealed by the Ecospirituality Score.
- A statistically significant strong negative correlation was found between the Ecospirituality Score of higher education students and their Stress Score.
- For one unit increase in Ecospirituality Score, Stress Score dropped by 0.154 units.
- A moderate level of explanatory power for the variance in the Stress Score was revealed by the Ecospirituality Score.

Chapter V Discussion and Conclusion

The main aim of the study was to examine the **"The relationship between higher education students' ecospirituality and their depression, anxiety, stress."**

Discussion, implications and recommendations, limitations, and conclusion were drawn in this chapter.

Discussion

The current study attempted to evaluate the significance of ecospirituality across various domains. It specifically focused on examining the relationship between ecospirituality and the three specific mental health concerns (depression, anxiety, stress) of students in higher education. The study aimed to identify differences in ecospirituality and depression, anxiety, stress among students based on their social-demographic, academic characteristics. The study conducted cross-sectional survey on 1289 students to find out fascinating facts and variances in accordance with the research questions. The researcher then attempted to analyse and discuss these findings based on his viewpoints. The findings of the current study were consistent with earlier empirical investigations in certain circumstances, while also differing in others.

Implications and recommendations

Ecospirituality can play a vital role in the field of education and mental health. The present study specifically established that ecospirituality is negatively correlated with higher education students' depression, anxiety and stress. So, if the concerning stakeholders of higher education can focus on strengthening students' ecospirituality construct that will eventually reduce the depression, anxiety and stress issues of the

students. Focused awareness campaigns, discussions, new policies, and related practices can be implemented in this regard.

Recommendations are given below in precise manner-

- **Education and Awareness:** Disseminating information to the higher education students regarding the advantages of ecospirituality is essential for fostering acceptance and incorporation.
- **Dialogue and understanding:** Promoting open dialogues regarding alternate approaches to mental health helps.
- **Policy integration:** It involves the development of policies that embrace ecospirituality in societal discourse, which can result in a more comprehensive approach to mental health care.
- **Ecospiritual practices:** Practicing various ecospiritual activities like meditation in natural setting, forest bathing, expressing gratitude towards nature's manifestations etc.

Limitations and further research direction

The current study has the following flaws that have been noted by the researcher and can be addressed by future studies-

- a) Among all twenty-eight states and eight union territories of India, only a single state was examined in this study.
- b) It would have been preferable if the study could include students from all the universities in West Bengal as well as students from a greater number of colleges in West Bengal.
- c) It was not possible to conduct interviews with the students regarding their perspectives on ecospirituality and mental health concerns.

- d) The study could not investigate other elements that may have unexpected relationships with the ecospirituality of higher education students and their mental health concerns.
- e) The inclusion of participatory activities in conjunction with the self-reported questionnaires could have enhanced the mapping of the study's constructs.

Conclusion

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the transcendentalist thinker had the belief that through complete immersion in nature, individuals could attain a more profound comprehension of the cosmos and their own position within it. Emerson underscored the interdependence of all existence and contended that individuals are integral components of a larger transcendental entity. The lectures and writings of Thomas Berry, a thinker from the twentieth century, have brought attention to the spiritual connection between humans and the Earth. The ecospiritual essence can be seen in several writings by Rabindranath Tagore. Itel (2024) accurately stated that ecospirituality frequently emerges through physical sensations, emotions, and profound, wordless insights. It involves perceiving the Earth's rhythm, detecting the delicate shifts in the surroundings, and encountering a deep feeling of connection. This inherent link with nature frequently results in substantial personal growth, as the distinctions between oneself and the natural environment become indistinct, strengthening a profound ecological awareness. At that juncture, students have the opportunity to emancipate themselves from their own mental health concerns. Perhaps the knowledge passed down from previous generations about the need of fully engaging in natural environment could be crucial for future healing, well-being, productivity, and the sense of something really meaningful and sacred to us individually (Heard, 2022).

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