

# We are not superior. Our survival depends on the natural world

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*If we are to have a future, we need to reframe our relationship with the earth. This World Nature Conservation Day, it's time to tell a new story about humanity.*

We've fallen for a lie. We've spun a story of human superiority, of an advanced species that surpasses the limitations of the material world. Our economic, social, and technological progress is supposedly testament to our development beyond the animal mind. But at what cost? The earth is burning before our eyes. We've plundered and destroyed it to the point of ecological collapse. If our transition to consciousness was an evolutionary advantage, we've botched it.

Humanity is built on stories. We're the only known species to communicate with language, to construct narratives. So far, the tale we've bought into is of progress at the expense of all else, to the detriment of the natural world we depend on. Our economic systems have driven us into consumers and wasters, chewing up the earth's resources and spitting them out again with no chance of recovery.

Since the 1970s, [60% of animal populations](#) have died as a direct result of human activity. This January was the [hottest on record](#). And last year the world watched as the Amazon rainforest [went up in flames](#). The empirical evidence of climate change and global heating is right before us. So why aren't we doing enough to stop it?

It's a failure of imagination. While we can see the weather change in small increments, it's not enough to convince us of disaster. We buy our pre-packaged food off clean shelves with no concept of its origins. We drive our cars and hop on planes but we can't see pollution raising the temperature. Denial is ashamedly convenient. To acknowledge the climate crisis would mean unravelling the very foundations we have built our lives on. It would require a fundamental transformation of the way we live.

Our survival depends on a new story. If we are going to turn the tide on this existential threat, we need a way of conceiving the natural world, not as a resource that serves us, but as the substance of life. George Lakoff, a cognitive linguist, [writes](#), "We are an inseparable part of Nature. Yet we separate self from other, and conceptualise Nature as other. This separation is so deep in our conceptual system that we cannot simply wipe it from our brains. It is a terribly false frame that will not go away."

This separation will, and currently is, leading to our demise. The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic is one of the starkest and most devastating consequences of our disconnection from nature. Attributed by the [WWF](#) as the result of our continual encroachment on natural habitats and increasing contact with wildlife, the pandemic is an obvious outcome of the age of the Anthropocene. Half a million deaths have occurred worldwide within a matter of months. If this isn't enough to stir action, what will be?

We are intrinsically connected to the natural world. It is not the "other". It is us. It is the reason for our existence. But we shouldn't only view it in relation to ourselves. By virtue of life itself, we should feel compelled to protect and preserve the earth. There is no separation, only a delicate balance. And it's time we took it upon ourselves to undo the tales we have created, to reimagine our relationship with the natural world.

## The stories that will save us

The future we construct for ourselves is founded on the stories we tell. Shifts in our thinking towards a vision of mutual survival and coexistence can influence not only individual behaviour, but systematic change. With enough reinforcement, how we communicate about the climate crisis can lead to a positive transformation in our actions. From words, to phrases, to narratives, the stories we tell provide a window into how we view ourselves. And it's by reframing these stories that we can change tomorrow's outlook.

Let's start at the beginning. The tales we hear from a young age can shape our perspectives long into adulthood. Environmental educators such as Xoli Fuyani and Catherine Constantinides are instilling an affinity for the natural world in children. In disadvantaged communities, [Fuyani](#) teaches students worm farming, bringing them closer to the earth and its intricacies. "The kids learn to treat animals with respect, no matter how big or small," she explains. Similarly, [Constantinides](#) is driving proactiveness in youth through her organisation Generation Earth, empowering them to not simply become environmentally aware, but be change makers with solutions.

This attitude is reflected in the current [Extinction Rebellion](#) movement. Led by young people, the name is a mirror of the uncompromising narrative people are now adopting – it's now or ever. The very wording we use can have a direct impact on our willingness to take action. The transition from 'climate change' to 'climate crisis' transforms the story of an environment altering through natural processes, to a disaster contingent on behaviour. In fact, a study by [SPARK Neuro](#) in the United States found that people across the political spectrum had a higher emotional response to the term 'climate crisis'. Language has power. And the words we use can convince us of the need for urgency.

But building on this is the necessity for policy. Accords such as the Paris Climate Agreement will only be successful so long as politicians and governments are actually willing to commit to redress. However, the legal recognition of environmental rights is a step forward in reframing how we treat nature systematically. Countries such as [New Zealand](#) have given natural phenomena legal personhood, granting further protection while recognising their significance to indigenous peoples. By acknowledging the natural world's very own right to life, we can enshrine a story that parallels our existing structures and creates impetus for change.

There is no single fix to this disaster we have created. It will not be easy, and we may not succeed. But if we are to have hope for the future, let alone the present, it starts in our minds, in our hearts. We must embrace a new story, a new way of life that imparts equal respect for humans, animals, plants, and the very sun and soil that grants us existence. If consciousness has been our evolutionary advantage, we must use it to all our benefit. Now is the time to decide what story we will tell. Either it will be a fable of the species that concocted its own extinction or, it will be a legend passed down through generations of how humanity saved the earth from itself.

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