

## The Natural Choice? Metaphors for nature in a UK government white paper

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### 1. 1. Introduction

Among the many discourses that today compete for political, scientific and popular attention, as well as for public funding, that of the environment speaks with the loudest, most urgent tones. During the Cold War, nuclear proliferation threatened the future of life on planet Earth; now, the excesses of industrial processes have given rise to analogous visions of environmental catastrophe. Such is the background against which today's ecological movement has taken shape. People have come together in 'Green Parties', which operate in many countries, in private organizations such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, the Institute for Deep Ecology, and many more. Such groups express what Castells (2009: 322), calls 'the widespread rise of deep ecological awareness', which characterizes our age. He points out that more than one billion people worldwide took part in the 2007 'Earth Day', evidence that, on a popular level, there is a growing awareness of the importance to human beings of the environment in which we live.

Environmental discourse has achieved a level of political and social influence, thanks to the actions of these pressure groups. Multinational businesses now routinely incorporate ecological discourse as an element of their branding (Vasta 2005). Politicians of all persuasions have at least to pay lip service to ecological values. This study explores the construction of environmental discourse in a recent white paper from the British government, with a special emphasis on the persuasive power of the metaphors used. It uses corpus analysis together with a broadly critical perspective, suggesting that ideology and political considerations may underpin the apparently natural (sic) discourse of the 'value' of Nature.

Ecolinguistics is an emerging field, as many linguists have responded to these social themes. The website of the Ecolinguistics Association<sup>1</sup>, collects articles on environmental topics. Some of these are responses to Goatly's (1996: 537) call for an 'ecological critical discourse analysis', and the current paper also has a critical orientation.

### 1.2. Introduction: White Papers

White papers are government documents on key policy issues. Their function is not legislative but rather to pave the way for future legislation (Chapin 1978: 33). By producing a white paper, governments invite stakeholders to suggest modifications, raise public consciousness of the issues, and assess the likely popularity of their future policies. White Papers present government policies while at the same time inviting opinions upon them (Pemberton 1969: 49). For example, the recent UK government white paper on the National Health Service makes the following explicit request for stakeholders and members of the public to express their views:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ecoling.net/#/articles/4563035324>. Accessed 10/05/2015.

<sup>2</sup> [http://berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2003/10/27\\_lakoff.shtml](http://berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2003/10/27_lakoff.shtml) Accessed: 3/05/2015

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.johnpaulcaaponigro.com/blog/9081/environmental-metaphors-robert-and-shana->

We are consulting on how best to implement these changes. In particular, the Department would welcome comments on the implementation of the proposals requiring primary legislation, and will publish a response to the views raised on the White Paper and the associated papers, prior to the introduction of the Bill. Comments should be sent by 5<sup>th</sup> October 2010, to: [NHSWhitePaper@dh.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:NHSWhitePaper@dh.gsi.gov.uk)

This consultative dimension is less evident in the Natural Choice white paper on the Environment. It is mentioned that consultation has already taken place, via public surveys, and the views of respondents have been incorporated into the text. The paper provides details of the government's proposals, and a timetable of future legislation, together with an outline of the expected budget.

The text features persuasive rhetoric, designed to convince readers of the rightness of the government's proposals. This is not only the case with the text, however. The persuasive function affects the whole document from a wider, semiotic perspective, so that diagrams, photos, choice of colours, and so on, all play their part. This paper explores the persuasive aspect of the government document from both a textual and a multimodal perspective.

### **2.1. Framing Nature: reading the cover image**

The picture shows the cover of the 2011 White Paper on the Environment, 'The Natural Choice: Securing the Value of Nature' (Figure One). Kress and Van Leeuwen (e.g. 1996) suggest techniques for interpreting the grammars of multi-modal communication, which can be used to explore meaning in an image of this kind.



*Figure One: cover of government White Paper on the environment.*

Colour and features of spatial composition combine in a reassuring image, which has the clarity of a magazine advert. It shows a multi-ethnic family in a public garden, bending over a flowerbed and laughing. Green is the dominant colour, and this basic environmental colour is also used for part of the verbal banner. Such features are predictable components of a document on the environment, and help associate the message-designers, the government, with ecological values.

Image constructors, say Kress and Van Leeuwen, tend to map given and new elements onto certain spatial areas, with the left side representing the former, the right side the latter:

Horizontal elongation causes a shape to lean towards the kind of structure in which what is positioned on the left is presented as ‘Given’, as information that is already familiar to the reader and serves as a ‘departure point’ for the message, while what is positioned on the right is presented as ‘New’, as information not yet known to the reader, and hence deserving his or her special attention. (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996: 57)

Here, then, the family, visibly happy and engaged in some outdoor pursuit, represents the given. It is taken for granted that British families enjoy spending time together outdoors, in a green context, interacting with the natural world, like the child here with her bucket and net. The inclusion of a non-Anglo man in a scene that would otherwise show a stereotypically ‘British’ family in a familiar British garden seems to acknowledge the transformed social context of a multi-cultural/multi-ethnic Britain.

The group’s attention is focused on the garden border, which occupies a central position, further underlining the left / right divide. The reader’s curiosity about the object of their attention, however, is disappointed by what is found on the right of the picture - the ‘new’, or that which is ‘deserving of special attention’. All that we see in this part of the picture is a combination of different natural objects - trees, lavender, grass and shrubs. The dominance of different shades of green in the ‘new’ section gives the colour itself communicative salience. The subliminal message of the picture could be that nature can provide a satisfying and joyous focus for family activity when encountered in the context of a well-kept garden.

As Kress and Van Leeuwen (ibid: 57) say, the principle of ‘vertical elongation’ gives greater communicative status to the elements at the top of an image; in this case, to the text. The picture can thus be seen as a semiotic representation, or illustration, of the message given textual form in the title. Somebody, presumably the government, is engaged in ‘securing the value of Nature’. This reading of the image sees it as a semiotic metaphor which underlines the rhetorical force of the text itself.

## **2.2. Framing Nature: reading the title**

‘Framing’, in Edwards’ succinct description (2005: 15), means ‘organizing information in a way that provides a particular interpretation or meaning for the audience’ (see also Jaworski and Coupland 1999: 24, Yrjölä 2011: 211). The persuasive function of framing is well illustrated by George Lakoff in his discussion of political discourse in the USA, where he shows how Republicans appeal to listeners’ experiences of parenthood to covertly enlist their support for right-wing programmes of removing social support structures<sup>2</sup>.

In a multimodal sense, framing would refer to the decision to show nature in the context of a perfectly kept garden of a college or church. A wild landscape showing nature untouched by human intervention would convey a different message. Nature is here shown

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<sup>2</sup> [http://berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2003/10/27\\_lakoff.shtml](http://berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2003/10/27_lakoff.shtml) Accessed: 3/05/2015

to be ‘institutionalised’, a resource which needs the controlling, nurturing force of government intervention if its value is to be realised.

Nor are the actual words of the title rhetorically neutral. The paper could have carried the straightforward label: ‘Government White Paper on the Environment’. Instead, the title helps frame the discourse, engaging with a specific target audience. The prominence given to the notion of value in the title serves to emphasise the ‘particular interpretation’ which the writers aim to convey through the document as a whole.

### 2.3. The notion of Nature’s value

The following section gives an idea of the general tone of the white paper:

Nature is good for human health. There is a wealth of evidence on the positive effect that spending time in the natural environment has on the health and emotional wellbeing of children. The quality of the local natural environment is one of the factors that shape our health over a lifetime. A good-quality environment is associated with a decrease in problems such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol. It is also linked with better mental health, reduced stress and more physical activity. If every household in England were provided with good access to quality green space, an estimated £2.1 billion in healthcare costs could be saved. On the other hand, a poor local natural environment can damage people’s health and contribute to health inequalities. For example, the social costs of the impacts of air pollution are estimated at £16 billion per year in the UK.

The text proceeds from a series of positive general statements about the environment to the following equations, expressive of a monetary value:

Access to quality green space = £2.1 billion

The impacts of air pollution = £16 billion per year

These equations are frequently encountered in the text, supporting the inference that when the word ‘value’ is used, the intended sense is monetary. Apart from the title, the text itself is full of references to value:

government and society need to account better for the value of nature, particularly the services and resources it provides (p.2)

Nature is framed as a *resource*, with an (economic) *value*. For example, on p. 52, we are told:

there is evidence that cyclists and walkers spend more in the local economy than visitors by car, benefiting local communities.

The ‘value’ of nature, for the text creators, can be quantified. As well as the financial increments to the local communities, there are also benefits to the cyclers and walkers, of an aesthetic/cultural kind, or in terms of health. These are quantifiable too, especially the latter, and elsewhere in the document the savings to the nation’s healthcare costs of the population spending time in nature are given a financial estimation.

Writing in the Guardian newspaper, Green MP Caroline Lucas described the White Paper's approach as follows:

while the economic evaluation of the natural world might be a well-intentioned effort to convince economists and the business community of its importance, putting a price on the environment risks simply commodifying it. (Guardian 13 June 2011, in Sibley-Esposito 2013: 19)

I suggest, below, that the emphasis on value throughout the document can be explained with reference to just this factor. The widespread appeal of environmental discourse at a popular level, alluded to above, demonstrates that the public at large are increasingly aware of the importance of these issues to their quality of life. The government would indeed seem to be targeting 'economists and the business community', using the language they understand best.

### 3.1. Metaphor

Since Aristotle's first discussions of metaphor, in his *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, it has been the subject of critical attention. It has been seen as central to poetic language or that of philosophical enquiry (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 403-4, Chilton 2009). Its presence has been studied in scientific discourse (Lemke 1990: 117). It has been identified as among key components of persuasive political rhetoric (Charteris-Black 2005 and 2009, Fairclough 2000: 32-3, Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 156-63, Rista-Dema 2008: 9-10). While for Aristotle it was an important figure of speech, especially useful in argumentation, more recent insights have tended to see it as a key, language-based resource in human cognition (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). In a recent popular work, James Geary summarises some of these developments:

Metaphorical thinking - our instinct not just for describing but for comprehending one thing in terms of another - shapes our view of the world, and is essential to how we communicate, learn, discover and invent [...] Our understanding of metaphor is in the midst of a metamorphosis. For centuries, metaphor has been seen as a kind of cognitive frill, a pleasant but essentially useless embellishment to 'normal' thought. Now, the frill is gone. New research in the social and cognitive sciences makes it increasingly plain that metaphorical thinking influences our attitudes, beliefs, and actions in surprising, hidden, and often oddball ways. (Geary 2011: 3).

Current metaphors about nature are manifold. In his book *The Politics of the Earth*, John Dryzek identifies some key metaphors that have figured in environmental discourse:

- Spaceship (the idea of 'spaceship earth')
- The grazing commons of a medieval village ('the tragedy of the commons')
- Machines (nature is like a machine that can be reassembled to meet human needs)
- Organisms (nature is a complex organism that grows and develops)
- Human Intelligence (ascribed to nonhuman entities such as ecosystems)
- War (against nature)
- Goddesses (treating nature in benign female form, and not just as Mother Nature)

(from Dryzek 2005: 18).

Such metaphors are not simply decorative semantic devices; rather, as Dryzek claims, their purpose is frequently rhetorical, aiming to “convince listeners or readers by putting a situation in a particular light” (Dryzek 2005: 19). An example of the ‘nature is an organism’ metaphor is the following phrase, from a website with an environmental theme:

For our own health we must tend to the health of our environment<sup>3</sup>

This is an instance of the category, familiar from Critical Discourse Analysis, of ‘presupposition’, of which Jones and Peccei (1999: 42) say, it can “persuade people to take something for granted which is actually open to debate” (it presupposes that there is a relationship between our health and that of the environment). But the metaphor has deontological force as well, which derives from the associations of the phoros: if a man is sick, he must receive ‘treatment’ and be ‘cured’. Support for environmental solutions and policies, therefore, is sought by means of this specific verbal formulation.

This familiar ‘sick man’ metaphor for referring to Nature is also found in the White Paper:

A healthy, properly functioning natural environment is the foundation of sustained economic growth, prospering communities and personal wellbeing (p.3)

The tie between a healthy environment and *material* prosperity is characteristic of the text. Once again, presupposition is involved, since the writers never spell out details of the cause/effect processes that connect unpolluted environments with economic success. The proposition is, in fact, questionable. The most successful global economy is currently that of China, a country notorious for its assault on its natural environment, and industrial processes in all countries have always been associated with environmental damage.

The intention is to explore the metaphors which are used by the white paper’s authors, and try to account for them in terms of an ‘imagined reader’ (Coulthard 1994: 3) on whose behalf the persuasive attempt is being made. As Charteris-Black (2004: 34) says in his explanation of the purpose of critical metaphor analysis, the aim is to uncover the covert, possibly unconscious, intentions of the creators of the text.

### 3.2. Metaphors in the Natural Choice White Paper

Charteris-Black’s work on metaphor has also provided a methodological guide. I have followed the procedure outlined in his 2004 book, which envisages:

a close reading of a sample of texts with the aim of identifying candidate metaphors [...] words that are commonly used with a metaphoric sense are then classified as metaphor keywords and it is possible to measure the presence of such keywords quantitatively in the corpus (Charteris-Black 2004: 35).

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.johnpaulcaponigro.com/blog/9081/environmental-metaphors-robert-and-shana-parkeharrison/> Accessed 15/05/2015

In the first table (Table One) I have recorded all instances of the first three candidate metaphors found during the close reading<sup>4</sup>. Other metaphors have only selected instances recorded.

Metaphor keyword/ occurrences	Instances	Metaphor scenario
<b>System</b> / 2	Nature is a complex, interconnected <i>system</i> the way that nature works as a <i>system</i>	Nature is a system
<b>Systems</b> /14	the value of natural <i>systems</i> and functioning natural <i>systems</i> natural <i>systems</i> support us natural water <i>systems</i>	
<b>Health</b> / 6	connecting through nature's <i>health</i> service water bodies in England will be in excellent <i>health</i> the <i>health</i> of the country's natural resources their <i>health</i> is essential for our wellbeing improve the <i>health</i> of ecosystems the <i>health</i> of our natural resources	Nature given human attributes
<b>Healthy</b> / 32	A <i>healthy</i> , properly functioning natural environment <i>Healthy</i> natural environments the benefits of a <i>healthy</i> natural environment economic development and a <i>healthy</i> natural environment the economic and social benefits of a <i>healthy</i> natural environment biodiversity, <i>healthy</i> soils, clean air our seas to be clean, <i>healthy</i> a <i>healthy</i> environment is essential to long-term growth landscapes with <i>healthy</i> soils <i>healthy</i> peat vegetation <i>healthy</i> , fertile soils <i>healthy</i> well-functioning ecosystems <i>healthy</i> neighbourhoods <i>healthy</i> functioning ecosystems a <i>healthy</i> , resilient natural environment a <i>healthy</i> planet a <i>healthy</i> ecosystem the <i>healthy</i> soils <i>healthy</i> ecosystems <i>healthy</i> water bodies <i>healthy</i> places to live <i>healthy</i> soil	Nature a patient
<b>Value</b> / 75	nature's intrinsic <i>value</i> a network of 50 Natural <i>Value</i> Ambassadors to <i>value</i> natural capital the global <i>value</i> of natural resources the <i>value</i> of natural capital high nature conservation <i>value</i> the <i>value</i> of the natural world the <i>value</i> of England's natural capital the <i>value</i> of natural resources the highest biodiversity <i>value</i> in the world the wildlife <i>value</i> of the site	Nature a commodity

<sup>4</sup> Repeated instances are omitted from the 'instances' column but counted as occurrences.

the *value* of coastal wetlands  
the *value* of natural services  
*value* of their green spaces  
ecological *value*  
Protecting natural *value*  
high-*value* areas  
in recognition of their particular *value*  
Capturing the *value* of nature  
the economic *value* of the natural environment  
nature's *value* to society  
the real *value* of nature  
innate *value* of nature  
biodiversity *value*  
goods, services and amenity *value*  
the economic and social *value* of nature  
add *value* to a local area's development  
the *value* of the natural environment  
the *value* of natural systems  
the *value* of physical environmental assets  
the value of environmental resources  
its real *value*  
the true *value* of nature

Table One: the Natural Choice White Paper Metaphors (i)

The optimum scenario is clearly to consider all instances involving the keyword, which allows for the appreciation of nuances. For example, the human, institutional associations of the NHS are present in:

connecting through nature's *health* service (p.46)

The next instance involves a standard phrase, 'to be in excellent health', which rather suggests a doctor's report on a patient, or a patient's communication with a relative:

water bodies in England will be in excellent *health* (p.29)

For reasons of space, however, other keywords only have one instance recorded (table two).

Metaphor keyword/ occurrences	Instances	Metaphor scenario
Service / 8	beneficiary of a natural <i>service</i>	Nature is a servant
Services / 142	a wide range of ecosystem <i>services</i> , including the inspiring beauty of our coasts	
Assets / 13	developing countries to value and enhance their own natural <i>assets</i> .	Nature is a resource
Capital / 95	The value of natural <i>capital</i>	Ditto
Rebuilds / 1	A new, restorative approach which <i>rebuilds</i> nature	Nature is a house
Functions / 8	valuable natural <i>functions</i> have already been degraded	Nature is an organism
Improvement / 13	support Nature Improvement Areas	Nature is an artefact
Restore / 10	We will <i>restore</i> natural capital where it is degraded	Nature is a work of art/or a patient?



<b>Partnership</b> / 10	We will establish Local Nature <i>Partnerships</i>	Nature is a business
<b>Network</b> / 22	a resilient and coherent ecological <i>network</i> across England	Nature is a system
<b>Resources</b> / 5	look after our natural <i>resources</i>	Nature is a resource
<b>Benefits</b> / 7	Too many of the <i>benefits</i> we derive from nature	Nature is an investment
<b>Access</b> / 21	Connecting through better neighbourhood <i>access</i> to nature	Nature is a closed space
<b>Recovery</b> / 1	a clear institutional framework to achieve the <i>recovery</i> of nature	Nature is a patient

Table Two: the Natural Choice White Paper Metaphors (ii)

I was interested in recovering metaphors for nature from the text, which meant that my close reading was directed towards the co-text of the words *nature* and *natural*, and this paper deals only with these terms. There are, however, many other ways of referring to nature, and it is also true that metaphors are involved in the use of terms such as *green* (itself a metaphor), *biodiversity*, *environment/al*, *ecology/ical*, among others. These are only considered where they show up in the data beside an identified keyword (for example, *biodiversity value*).

It is also possible to come across metaphors which seem to provide no keywords:

Nature itself also *stands to gain* from an economy which better reflects its real value (p.35)

The figurative sense is once more in the area of profit / loss.

The metaphors which emerge from analysis of the keyword co-text can also be found in stretches of text without these keywords. For example, the notion that NATURE IS A PATIENT, clearly involved in text using the keywords *health/y*, is also found in the following:

nature in England is highly fragmented and unable to respond effectively to new pressures such as climate and demographic change (p.3)

This metaphor is suggestive of nature as a clinically depressed patient, unable to cope with the stresses of modern life.

The graph below shows the values for each keyword:

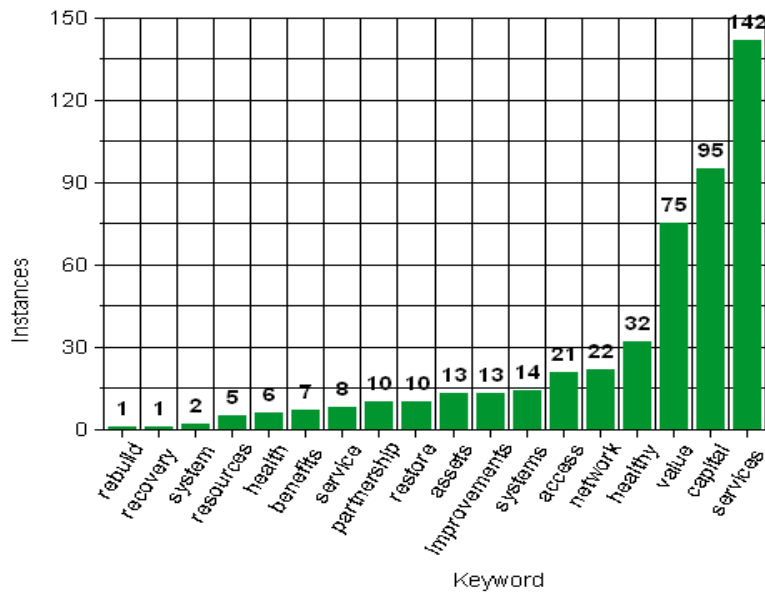


Figure Two: Metaphor Keywords

Two principle domains of metaphoric reference are clearly visible. Firstly that of *business* (capital, value, services, benefits, partnership, assets, resources), secondly that of *health* (health, healthy, restore, recovery). A third, smaller group can be identified which refers to *system* (system/s, network).

### 3.3 Discussion (1) Metaphors in ‘the Natural Choice’

80% of the metaphors are found in the domain of business, which is less surprising than it might be, given what has been said about the orientation of the White Paper. Among the most common collocates for ‘nature’ are the terms *value*, *partnerships*, *services*, *benefits*, *economy/economic*, *businesses* and *markets*, a finding that underlines the centrality of this semantic field.

The business metaphors emphasise a special understanding of nature that sees it primarily as a social resource on which a monetary value can be put. ‘Value’, of course, is a term which does not necessarily imply a monetary sense, and it is not always possible to identify the precise meaning in each case. At times, the context makes it plain that the ‘ordinary sense’ is intended, as in its first appearance here:

Most people rightly believe in the innate *value* of nature [...] But the *value* of nature to our economy and society, and to our personal wellbeing, is also clearer than ever (p.7)

The second instance, however, by referring to nature’s contribution to the economy, suggests a monetary value. Although the reference to ‘personal wellbeing’ seems to include non-monetary notions of value, elsewhere in the document such apparently abstract notions are brought down to earth:

If every household in England were provided with good access to quality green space, an estimated £2.1 billion in healthcare costs could be saved (p.46)

Nature, then, is indeed, *commodified* in these metaphors. Green spaces are not simply good for people in a vague, general sense; rather, a precise monetary value can be placed upon them. Such equations allow for activities like jogging, walking the dog, or kids having green spaces to play in to be included in economic calculations such as the annual budgets of central government.

The same applies to metaphors involving the keyword *assets*. One of the OED's first definitions of the term refers to the realm of business:

an item of property owned by a person or company, regarded as having value and available to meet debts

Britain is thus metaphorically identified as a company, and its natural resources are seen as assets with a monetary value.

This is also the case with the term *capital*, one of the most frequent metaphors. The OED defines this as

wealth in the form of money or other assets owned by a person or organization or available for a purpose such as starting a company or investing

The term frequently collocates, in the text, with *natural* in the noun phrase *natural capital* (94 instances). This referential strategy may have a predicational purpose, and could be an example of *grammatical presupposition* (Treanor 2013) in which the use of *natural* as an adjective presupposes that there is such a category of capital (see also Van Dijk 2003: 100, Götzsche 2009: 176). The term is, in fact, current among economists (Ekins et al 2003). Once more, the metaphor affirms that the principle evaluation of nature's significance is in terms of its contribution to the economy:

The Government will take action to capture the value of natural capital on the nation's balance sheet. In doing so, we will end the situation where gains and losses in the value of natural capital go unrecorded and unnoticed. (p.36)

The metaphor aligns the natural world with the interests of a capitalist society. In contrast to a scenario in which the capitalist project and the natural world are in conflict, nature is here included in the capitalist world view.

The most frequent of all metaphors for nature sees it as the provider of *services* of one kind or another. Services come in different forms:

- Provisioning services, including crops, livestock, fish, energy (wind power), water supply, etc.;
- Cultural services including recreation, landscape and cultural heritage;
- Regulating services including carbon storage, flood management, pollination, improving water, soil and air quality. (from p. 27)

Nature is positioned as humanity's benefactor, as it 'freely provides us' with all these things which, acting like spoilt children, we too often 'take for granted' (p.2). The authors' familiar strategy once more appears, as we are told:

There are multi-million pound opportunities available from greener goods and services, and from markets that protect nature's services (p.4)

Rather than as a manservant performing errands for humanity, perhaps closer to the mark is to see nature as one of the service industries - health, education, or transport - operating on a massive scale, its activity benefitting the whole society.

These metaphors operate as a kind of systematic web throughout the whole document, and carry a message which may at times be subliminal, but which is made explicit so often that it appears central to the communicative purpose of the text as a whole.

The other two metaphorical domains found, that of nature as *system* and as *patient*, are related to this overarching message. To view nature as a system relates it to patterns of human organization such as bureaucratic, transport or business systems. What is of interest in the metaphors from the realm of health, meanwhile, is the connection which the writers presuppose between a pristine natural environment and economic prosperity:

economic development and a *healthy* natural environment (p.10)  
the economic and social benefits of a *healthy* natural environment (p.3)  
a *healthy* environment is essential to long-term growth (p.10)

Once more the writers make a specific claim about the financial benefits of a 'healthy' environment:

we reject the outdated idea that environmental action is a barrier to growth or that achieving economic development and a healthy natural environment are incompatible objectives [...] protected natural areas can deliver economic returns that are 100 times greater than the cost of their protection and maintenance (p.10)

The White Paper's message, then, is clear. It is also clear why the writers regard 'protecting the value of nature' as a 'natural choice'. There are sound economic reasons behind environmentally friendly policies, and the metaphors play an important part in developing the argument.

### 3.4 The 'National Ecosystem Assessment'

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Right Hon. Caroline Spelman, states in her foreword to the White Paper:

Over 500 scientists from around the world have now developed a tool by which we can assess more accurately the value of the natural world around us (p.2)

She is referring to the 'National Ecosystem Assessment'<sup>5</sup>, a British government initiative introduced in response to the publication, in 2005, of the global Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. This report on the current state of the world's ecosystems, by more than a thousand prominent scientists, stimulated individual countries to produce their own

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<sup>5</sup> <http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/Resources/tabid/82/Default.aspx> Accessed 15/05/2015

ecosystem assessments. Britain's was the first to be completed. The point of the tool is precisely that it attempts to assess the range of 'services' nature provides in terms susceptible to economic analysis. Figure Two shows the division of the UK environment into eight broad habitat types. Of especial interest is the way so-called 'cultural' services (recreation and tourism, aesthetic values, cultural heritage, spiritual values, education, sense of place, health benefits) are tabulated together with *regulating* services (e.g. flood and wildfire regulation) and *provisioning* services such as food, timber and pharmaceutical products.

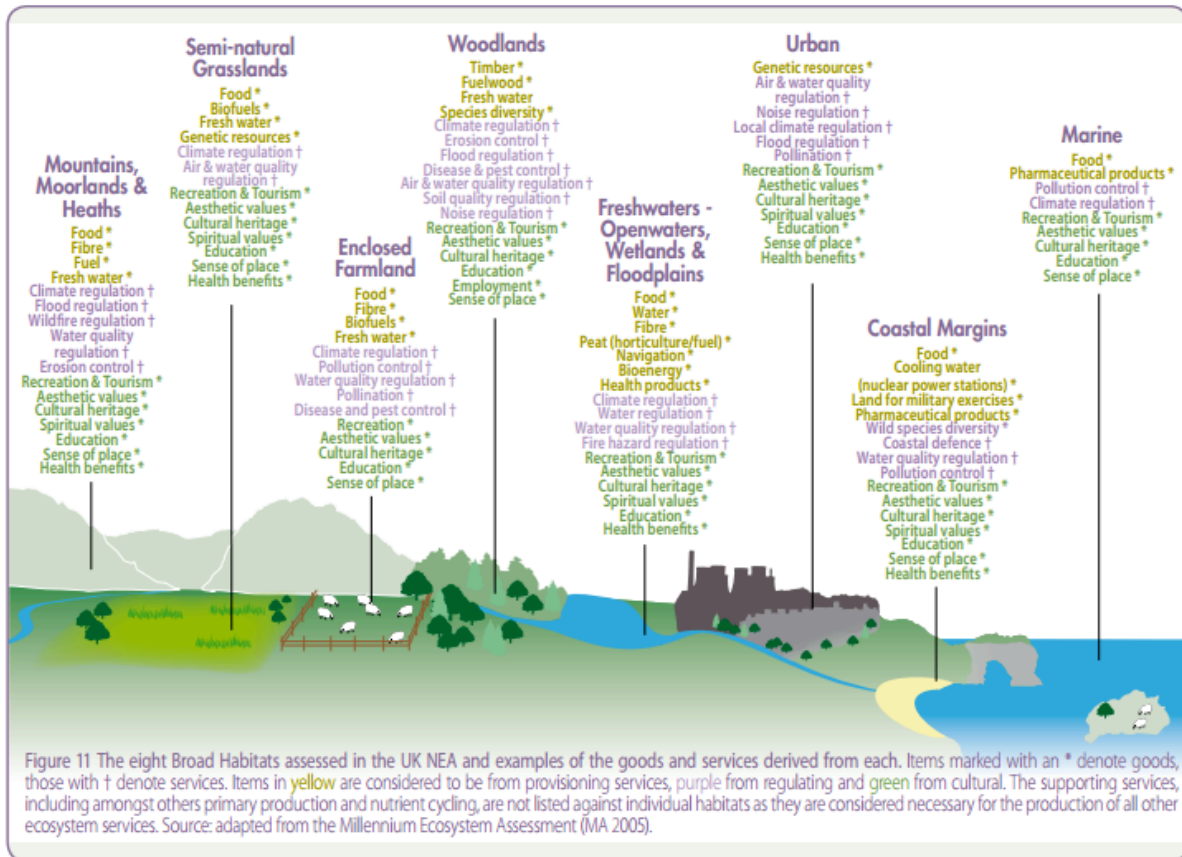


Figure Two: from the National Ecosystem Assessment (p.17)

Among other questions posed by the report is why the economic values of ecosystem services should be incorporated into decision-making. Some of the language is reminiscent of that found in the subsequent White Paper:

ecosystem services are clearly crucial to the more than 3,000 million outdoor recreational visits which UK residents make each year. Analyses conducted for the UK NEA shows that these visits generate a social value in excess of £10,000 million annually (p.42)

In its report on the release of the National Ecosystem Assessment, the Guardian newspaper quoted Bob Watson, co-author of the report, saying:

Putting a value on these natural services enables them to be incorporated into policy in the same way that other factors are. We can't persist in thinking of these things as free<sup>6</sup>.

Later in the article, the newspaper specifies some of the NEA's findings:

The health benefits of living with a view of a green space are worth up to £300 per person per year, in part by providing areas for people to exercise but also because simply looking at nature lifts people's spirits, according to scientific research. Living close to rivers, coasts and wetlands is also a boon - the benefits to residents are about £1.3bn a year.

The prominent role given to economic aspects of value found in the White Paper is thus continuing a discourse also found in the earlier study.

### 3.5 Political context

White papers are not produced in a political vacuum; rather, they represent policy tools of the current government, and as such are not free from ideological traces. The Natural Choice White Paper was published in 2011, during the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition government led by David Cameron. It would, therefore, seem to make sense to interpret the framing strategy displayed in terms of the underlying political constraints on the Conservatives, the dominant party in the governing coalition.

The Conservative party has two important strands of support, historically associated with it. On the one hand it is seen as the British party, *par excellence*, of industry and business, the natural ally of capitalist enterprises. On the other, it is associated with the countryside, with the conservation of rural areas and traditions. Ex-Prime Minister John Major was making an appeal to the country voter when he famously predicted:

Fifty years on from now, Britain will still be the country of long shadows on cricket grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and, as George Orwell said, 'Old maids bicycling to holy communion through the morning mist'<sup>7</sup>

The white paper recognizes that public concern for the environment has reached unprecedented levels ('Most people already recognise that nature has an intrinsic value' / p.2). By inference there must be some people excluded from this ('most' is not the same as 'all'). If this were not the case, there would be no need for government initiatives to protect nature. Given the emphasis on 'value' throughout the text, it can also be inferred that the people not recognizing nature's intrinsic value are the very people whose activity does the most damage to it, *i.e.* industrial corporations, multi-nationals, and capitalists generally. Social actors, that is, for whom the profit motive is the paramount factor in decision-making. The Conservative Party has always numbered these among its traditional supporters.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/jun/02/uk-green-spaces-value> Accessed 15/05/2015

<sup>7</sup> [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John\\_Major](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_Major) Accessed 15/05/2015

Multinational businesses have become accustomed to incorporate ecological discourse as an element of their branding; as if, far from being the cause of environmental degradation, they are working in harmony with local eco-systems (see Vasta 2005). Harré et al (1999: 115) speak of 'the seemingly incompatible accreditations of scientific, moral and economic discourses'. The writers of the document, then, attempt to transcend the apparently irreconcilable opposition between the needs of business and respect for the environment by emphasising the monetary value of the latter. The aim could be to keep on board both factions of their traditional support.

However, this is to assume a strict connection between white papers and the government producing them which may be unwarranted. The White Paper on the environment, in fact, though published under the Conservative Lib-Dem coalition, must have been conceived some time before they came to office, during New Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown's premiership. The rhetoric of business applied to environmental issues sits less comfortably with Labour ideology, however far to the right they may have moved under Tony Blair's leadership.

What seems more likely is that the actual branding decisions were not taken by politicians at all, but by bureaucrats at the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), influenced by the National Ecosystem Assessment which, as we have seen, was another government document published in the same year (2011). How far the logic of financial evaluation is consistent with the ideology of Whitehall would make a fascinating study, although data collection would represent a significant hurdle.

#### **4. Conclusion**

We have explored the metaphors used in the White Paper on the environment, and seen their role in an attempt to convince readers of the financial benefits of smart environmental policies. In part, I have suggested, the persuasive effort is directed towards those whose actions have most impact, for good or ill, on the environment. The principle argument in this sense, to which the metaphors make their contribution, would seem to be:

SINCE

the only language corporate enterprises understand is that of money,

and SINCE

their activities put nature at risk

and SINCE

it is possible to make money through environmentally-friendly economic activity,

THEREFORE

Such firms should engage more in such activity.

How convincing they may find this argument is a matter, in the end, for the corporate businesses themselves. The population in general, I have suggested, are already aware of 'the innate value of nature'.

Having said as much, however, the public, consultative character of white papers should not be forgotten. They are not private documents designed for circulation among a target audience, in this case the business community. It may be that a discourse of the economic value of nature can be accounted for with reference to wider social trends, even to

the prevailing climate of global financial unrest. Many people across the UK are re-evaluating their relationship with the natural world, uncovering unexpected sources of income and possibilities of employment<sup>8</sup>.

Some observers have expressed doubt over whether monetary values can be attributed, at all, to intangible aspects of our interaction with the environment. In a report for DEFRA, for example, R.K.Turner, using the term 'existence values' to describe these, comments:

Existence value derives from individuals who feel a benefit from just knowing that, for example, an ecosystem and/or its component parts, exist and will continue to exist somewhere on the planet. The economic valuation literature has yet to reach a comprehensive consensus on whether use and non-use value can be formally distinguished using standard welfare economic measures.

The risk of this approach to nature would seem to be precisely that raised by the Guardian reporter, that it commodifies our environment by attempting to put a price on every aspect of our interaction with it. It is questionable, though, how far economic values can be attached to an ecological phenomenon such as a natural park. For many visitors to the Lake District, for example, the experience may represent a re-charging of batteries that will lead, in turn, to an economic benefit in terms of improved workplace performance. But for a romantic poet, the inspiration of contact with nature could lead them to produce a 'Daffodils' or a 'Kubla Khan'. What economic value, one wonders, would DEFRA place on these?

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Balcony Growing: <http://www.pottyinnovations.co.uk/feature-raised-bed-balcony-gardening.html#.Ug4qJ9KTQig> or Allotments: <http://www.nsalg.org.uk/> Accessed 15/05/2015



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