

## **The Transformative Potential of Future Visioning and Reciprocity For Nature Conservation Policy and Practice**

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### **Abstract**

Humans are degrading the natural systems we rely on. A transformation in our relationships with nature could reverse this decline, with broad benefits to society. In recognition, governments are seeking to promote positive relationships with nature and increase engagement with pro-nature behaviors. However, these efforts may lack a clear vision to guide transformative change. Developing shared visions between agencies could improve policy effectiveness and instill stewardship. We sought to explore the transformative potential of future visioning through an Appreciative Inquiry approach. In a transformative practice session at the 2023 Transformations Community conference, we guided participants to develop a future vision where humans are living in reciprocity with nature. Our 14 participants drew on their disciplinary expertise (e.g., sustainability transformation, climate change, nature conservation) and personal relationships with nature. We captured these visions via sticky notes, rich picturing, and discussion and later employed thematic analysis to establish relevant themes. The themes we developed encompassed transforming ourselves (e.g., mental barriers and opportunities), transforming society (considering systemic barriers and opportunities), lifelong entanglement with nature (what this looks like and how it is achieved), and incorporating multiple (including more-than-human) voices. The process generated new ideas for change and highlighted the complexities of developing meaningful and socially just visions. We intend to build on this process by engaging government colleagues and other groups to co-produce a vision to inform Victorian policy (Australia).

### **Introduction**

Humans are degrading the very natural systems that we rely on for our survival, societal well-being, and economic prosperity (IPBES 2022; UNEP 2021). Our actions are causing a

biodiversity crisis that we are failing to reverse (DAWE 2021; WWF 2020), with Australia having some of the highest rates of species extinction in the world (Burbidge 2023; Woinarski et al. 2019). At the same time, we are faced with growing societal issues such as poverty, mental and physical illnesses, and increasing frequency and severity of major environmental crises such as wildfires, flooding, and other major hazards associated with climate change. A meaningful response to these interrelated issues requires a transformative change to our political, economic, technological, cultural, and societal systems (Fazey et al. 2020; Riedy and Waddock 2022). In seeking to develop responses, governments and environmental institutions around the world are acknowledging the critical role human-nature relationships play in tackling these intractable yet interrelated problems (DELWP 2017; Natural England 2020; New Zealand Government 2020; UNEP 2021).

At present, the view that humans are different and separate from nature (i.e., human exceptionalism) is prevalent in many Western societies. Our relationships are largely unidirectional, where humans consistently extract, use, and benefit from nature's resources and acknowledge little responsibility or accountability (Ojeda et al. 2022), to the detriment of both other humans and more-than-human nature (hereafter, 'nature'). This is a common theme in the ecosystem services framework, which originated out of a human exceptionalist worldview (Ojedokun and Oluyinka 2011; West et al. 2020). However, this position does not have to determine the future of our relationships with nature. An abundance of diverse examples arise from Indigenous culture and local communities in rural and non-rural settings that seek more harmonious and reciprocal relationships with nature (Country et al. 2016; Ojeda et al. 2022). There is also a shift in global biodiversity policy and the people-nature discourse. For example, the UN Stockholm+50: Unlocking a Better Future (SEI and CEEW 2022) provides several key messages for re-defining human-nature relationships and creating transformative change: *"Our relationship with nature needs redefining, from one of extraction to one of care. Human-nature connectedness should be strengthened in our social norms and value systems, and in how we live our everyday lives"* (SEI and CEEW 2022: 9). Daily practices and ethics of care, such as reciprocity, emphasize stewardship for nature (Jax et al. 2018; West et al. 2020), and speak to *"a culture of gratitude, (where) everyone knows that gifts will follow the circle of reciprocity and flow back to you again"* (Wimmerer 2020: 381). From this worldview, relationships constitute our actions and care for nature, offering novel, ethical, and equitable pathways for sustainability transformations (Jax et al. 2018; Ojeda et al. 2022).

Reconciling our relationship with nature may present a pathway to restoring natural systems and strengthening societal and ecological resilience (Wyborn et al., 2021). Governments have a critical role to play here, in directly shaping conservation policy and management but also indirectly through infrastructure and other systems that shape our interactions with nature. Yet, government institutions typically operate in a siloed manner, limiting the potential for holistic, reciprocal approaches that could have meaningful impacts. Improving human relationships with nature has the potential to benefit both nature conservation and human well-being objectives. For example, spending time engaging with nature is linked to mental and physical health benefits (Capaldi et al. 2015). Achieving transformative change in our relationships with nature requires transformative change in the approaches taken by governing institutions, including collaboration across departments (e.g., environment and health).

Governing institutions seeking to achieve this change would benefit from theories and practices in sustainability transformation. For our purposes, we define transformation to mean “fundamental changes in structural, functional, relational, and cognitive aspects of socio-ecological systems that lead to new patterns of interactions and outcomes” (Patterson et al. 2017: 2). Achieving goals associated with transformation requires deliberate normative steering, which can be achieved through processes and tools such as future visioning (Scoones et al. 2020). Future visioning is increasingly being adopted by scientists, policymakers, and other change agents as a mechanism to assist stakeholders to consider futures that capture diverse values and goals (Nalau and Cobb, 2022; van der Voorn et al., 2023). The visioning process can be powerful in that it is participatory, centered around the co-development of stories and sharing of knowledge, and is proclaimed to support reconciliation and empowerment of communities to build and achieve their desired future scenarios (Inayatullah 2008; Nalau and Cobb 2022; Nikolakis 2020). Future visioning can be predictive (what will happen), explorative (what could happen), or normative (what should happen), although the latter is underutilized and yet—by envisaging imaginative possibilities removed from existing assumptions—arguably provides the most transformative potential (Nalau and Cobb 2022).

The concept of reciprocity between people and nature has been proposed to have transformative potential for sustainability (Kenter and O’Connor 2022; Ojeda et al. 2022) and centers around accountability, offering an alternative to the human exceptionalist, unidirectional relationship. Embedding reciprocity in people and nature relations offers “*conceptual support to current pathways for sustainability transformations,*” specifically through the entanglement of people and nature, re-defining how knowledge is produced and re-thinking how our organizations and institutions are structured (Ojeda et al. 2022: 960).

Engaging in notions of reciprocity for sustainability transformations is an emerging research practice and focus of international policies, as seen in the IPBES Life Framework of Values that attempts to connect the plural and deep ways people understand and experience nature and the variety of ways nature matters (IPBES 2022; Kenter and O’Connor 2022). As such, we see the nexus of transformations, visioning, and reciprocity as a potentially novel contribution to sustainability methods. In this case, we consider that future visioning has the potential to (1) disrupt unidirectional relationships to nature in how we think about conservation and develop novel, holistic approaches and (2) develop a shared vision that instills ownership and embeds support that can facilitate action, resourcing, and reciprocity. The motivation for this research lies in the authors’ (LVE, CR, KL, FH, SB, EP) work as part of the state government biodiversity plan in Victoria, Australia, *Protecting Victoria’s Environment 2037* (DELWP 2017). This plan includes a human-centric component, *Victorians Value Nature* (VVN), which prioritizes strengthening the connection with nature among the Victorian public and increasing public engagement with target pro-nature behaviors. Other jurisdictions have developed plans with similar goals (e.g., Commonwealth of Australia 2019; Natural England 2020; New Zealand Government 2020). Through our lived experience as public servants in the Victorian government at the time of this research, responsible for research, implementation, and monitoring to support achieving the VVN objectives, we recognize the limitations of the plan. While VVN’s goals have transformative intent, its potential to achieve meaningful transformation may be limited without engaging with approaches from transformations theory and practice and diverse ontologies, including Indigenous concepts of relationality and reciprocity. Specifically, while some goals seek to improve relationships with nature, a clear vision of what these relationships might look like is

lacking. Indeed, the ongoing classification of ‘humans’ as separate from ‘other nature’ requires attention. Further, a lack of innovation culture, limited diversity in ontologies and disciplinary expertise, a failure to adequately practice reflexivity pertaining to cultures of conservation governance (Boyce et al. 2022), and risk-averse organizational culture present barriers to straying from ‘business as usual’ approaches within many contexts (Arundel et al. 2019; Berl et al. 2022).

To support our learning and development of a visioning approach, we engaged the expertise of participants of a sustainability transformations event, the international *Transformations Community* conference at the University of Technology Sydney. Our broad aim was to introduce the VVN to participants and explore the validity of transformation tools, visioning, and reciprocity concepts in seeking improved nature connectedness through government planning. We were not seeking to implement an in-depth future visioning and back-casting process; rather, our primary goals were to (1) learn from the knowledge and experiences of participants attending the transformations conference through a shared experience of a transformative practice process and (2) elicit novel ideas that may inform our future efforts. We intend to “stress test” these lessons in future workshops to develop a vision among our target audiences (e.g., government colleagues, partnering organizations, and other relevant community stakeholders).

## **Methods**

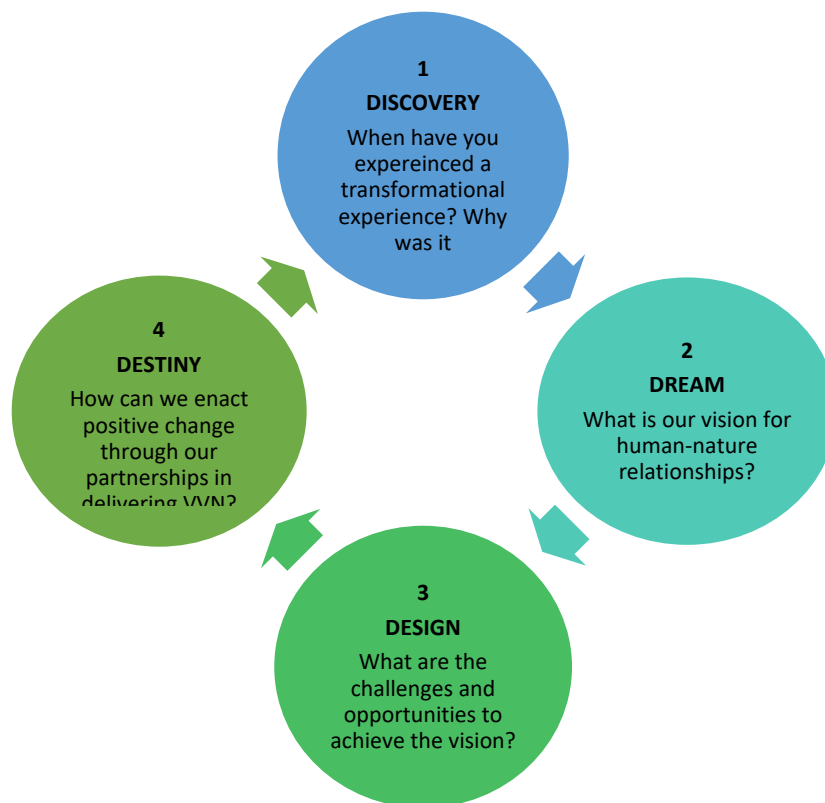
We ran a Transformative Practice workshop at the 2023 Transformations Community conference. The session occurred on the third and final day (14<sup>th</sup> July 2023) of the conference. This timing meant that participants had spent the previous two days thinking about future visions, transformative change, and the role of partnerships in facilitating change. We encouraged participants to draw on their experiences over the past few days to develop a vision for the future relevant to our policy issue. This research was approved by Monash University’s Human Research Ethics Committee (#28265).

We used an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework to guide the design of the workshop. Ai is “the cooperative, co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them” (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005: 15). It involves understanding what drives a community or organization when it is at its best (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005; Watkins et al. 2011). Ai is often adopted in organizational change and has gained traction in the fields of action research (Stowell 2013; Whitney et al. 2019) and evaluation (Coghlan et al. 2003). AI is one approach for supporting participants in a transformation system to progress through “connecting [ing] their collective aspirations and co-developing strategies and action plans” (Waddock et al. 2022: 89).

We adopted an AI framework because it provides an opportunity for generating ideas through open, positive, strength-based conversations. These ideas arise through a process of personal and collaborative inquiry, appreciating and valuing what is working best, inspiring creative thinking through visioning a future narrative, and being innovative in articulating how we collectively deliver on that vision (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005). This approach provides new ways of engaging with the biodiversity crisis as a method for broadly generating ideas (Bushe 1999) and positive visions of the future, including through reciprocal human-nature relationships. Practically, this method provided an opportunity to draw new voices into the implementation of the VVN program and Biodiversity Plan in ways that help to envision what transformation could look like and to engage in practice beyond business-as-usual.

In addition to the recognition that positive emotions are motivating and that these sustain momentum, energy, and connection required for change, Ai contends that people are constantly “making sense of people and the world,” learning and interpreting stories of the systems they operate within and that we start creating change from the moment of inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005: 49). As such, we (authors) recognize that we took part in the co-creation of knowledge. Our approach was informed by our multidisciplinary backgrounds, which span social and ecological sciences, communications, and policy across academia and government, and our normative position that we have a moral imperative to reverse the biodiversity crisis and that promoting positive human-nature relationships could be an important component of this (Mackay and Schmitt 2019).

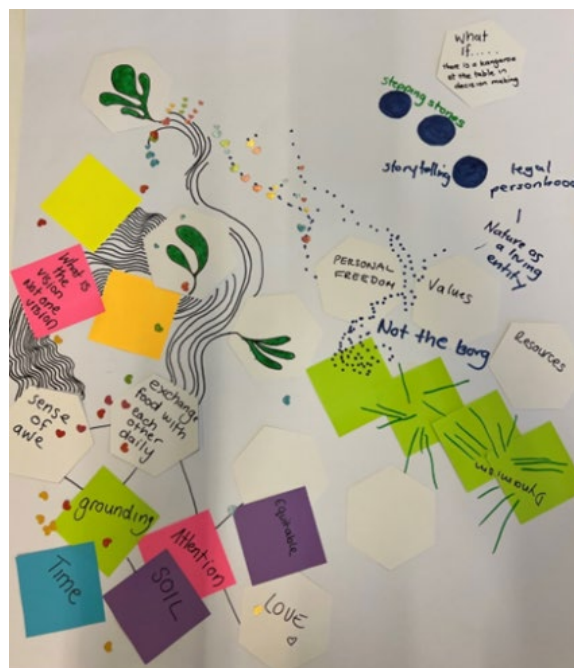
For the workshop, participants were seated at tables in groups of 2-5 people. Each table was provided with butcher’s paper, sticky notes, and marker pens to write or draw. Each table also had a participant information sheet and a QR code to access a consent form. The consent form asked participants about their disciplinary expertise, employment type, and whether they consented to their contributions being collected as data. We did not collect demographic information. Participants were invited to provide their email addresses if they wished to be included as co-authors. The session ran for 90 minutes.



*Figure 1. Appreciative Inquiry '4-D phases' adapted for the design and delivery of the Transformations Practice Session workshop our team delivered at the Transformations Community Conference at the University of Technology, Sydney, 2023.*

There are four foundational sequential phases of the Ai cycle, referred to as the ‘4-D cycle,’ which we used to design each part of the workshop (Figure 1). The phases were adapted from Figure 4 in Cooperrider and Whitney (2005: 21). We started with the ‘Discovery’ phase as an icebreaker activity, asking participants to think about a time they had been part of transformative change and discuss what was at the root of that shift. This activity served as a priming exercise to encourage thinking about transformation and participants’ lived experiences. Second, we focused on the ‘Dream’ phase, which was a future visioning exercise focused on what has meaning, significance, and value by dreaming of the ideal outcome for human-nature relationships. Specifically, we asked participants to: “Imagine it is the year 2050, people and nature are thriving, we live in a society where nature is valued, we walk together to practice an ethic of care for the natural world, and that this ethic of care is enmeshed in all that we do, in our education and health systems, institutions, all government levels, our communities, households and as individuals”, as presented on a PowerPoint slide at the beginning of the exercise. Participants were then asked to use sticky notes to discuss, describe, and otherwise create a narrative of what this looks and feels like.

In the ‘Design’ phase of the Inquiry, participants engaged in ‘rich picturing’ to identify the challenges and barriers to achieving the future visions articulated in the ‘Dream’ phase. Rich picturing asks participants to diagrammatically represent an analysis of a situation, bringing together multiple viewpoints, meaningful dialogue, and collaborative analysis (Bell and Morse 2013), producing valid research outcomes (Conte and Davidson 2020). As a free-form technique, participants were given basic instructions to discuss, draw, and use symbols and words to describe the actions needed to realize our collective vision (see Figure 2). In the ‘Destiny’ phase, we interpreted participants’ rich pictures, bringing meaning to the complexity (Bell and Morse 2013) and surfacing potential opportunities and challenges. The session was recorded as part of the conference; we had an observer-participant make notes through the session, our team added brief post-it notes in summarising the whole-group discussions, and documented our reflections following the event.



*Figure 2. An example of participants 'rich picturing' during the 'Design' phase of the Appreciative Inquiry process at our Transformations Practice Session workshop conducted at the Transformations Community Conference at the University of Technology, Sydney, 2023.*

Fourteen people participated in the workshop. The main areas of current or past employment were academia (n = 8), state or federal government (n = 5), and grassroots or community groups (n = 4). Their disciplinary expertise spanned nature conservation (n = 9), systems transformation (n = 6), climate science or other climate change related (n = 6), human behavior change (n = 4), environmental policy (n = 4), and one each in education, media communication, and narratives. Respondents could indicate more than one employment type and disciplinary field.

### **Analytic Approach**

We took an essentialist/realist and semantic approach to our analysis to align with our two key aims to identify (1) novel ideas for a new relationship with nature and (2) process-related ideas or concerns that were revealed by our participants. Following the workshop, we engaged in a reflexive thematic analysis approach to explore the data (Braun and Clarke 2021). From these data, we individually grouped content into child nodes and parent nodes (themes) pertaining to concepts raised by participants spanning the four stages of the Ai cycle (Fig 1). We then listened to the recording to check whether we had missed any concepts that might not have been captured in the written notes. We indicate the source of the data as SN (sticky notes), RP (rich picturing), or SW (spoken word), noting that there was a high degree of overlap between these, and referred to the phase of the workshop as 1 (Discovery), 2 (Dream), 3 (Design), and 4 (Destiny). Quotes used are from workshop participants unless indicated to have been said by facilitators. To practice reflexivity (Braun and Clarke 2021), the workshop facilitators convened to discuss and share the node structures we had developed individually, workshopping to seek consensus. Finally, we gave participants who expressed interest in co-authoring an opportunity to review the themes developed and discuss findings (i.e., member checking, Creswell and Miller 2000). The coding framework and example data are provided in Supporting Information.

### **Results**

Here, we present the major themes that were developed from the analysis. These span some or all of the four phases of the AI approach (see Supporting Information).

### **Transforming Ourselves**

In the Discovery phase, participants discussed their experiences of transformative change. While some discussions centered on organizational and collective transformational change, workshop participants also shared personal experiences. These included descriptions of changing personal relationships (i.e., betrayal, loss of trust) and personal trauma (i.e., health-related problems, near-death experiences (SN1)). Participants discussed navigating disruption in their lives to overcome adversity that *"affected your sense of control...that has had an impact on our lives, and that is still having an impact"* (SW1), including *"personal resilience through acceptance of losing control, finding purpose in constant disruption"* (SN1, SW1). Later, participants remarked on personal barriers to transforming relationships with nature. For example, *"we worry too much about creating (a connection with nature)"* (RP3),

remarking on the need to be curious, “*let go,*” and learn, including “*cultivat[ing] different thinking skills*” (SN2).

## **Transforming Systems**

Through discussions, participants identified the need for big-picture, structural changes targeting multiple systemic barriers and influences. The conversation included challenging the existing capitalist system whereby we seek constant economic growth and social norms of material abundance (SN2,3, RP3). Participants considered how governance tools (e.g., legislation, policy) guide individual and collective choices in how we interact with nature and what priorities governments choose to invest in. This theme reflects relationships with nature that can be supported or allowed to flourish by providing structural shifts in society to create opportunities across contexts and lifespans for close, meaningful experiences, from the local to the structural level. These experiences are supported through communities connecting with nature, with comments highlighting a role in “*all aspects of the system*” (SW4), including at the local scale, consuming, protecting, and “*doing things simply and locally*” (SW4) with multiple ways of engaging people so “*there’s a pathway for everyone*” (SW4).

According to participants, transformation happens when nature is “*everyone’s business, like food, it’s part of everyone’s lives on a daily basis*” (SW4). Transformation happens through our language and “*the way we talk about nature – at the moment, it is very limiting.*” Two other areas for transformation surfaced: through education and the built environment. For example, participants “*imagined architecture being different – and how we adapt it so we can be part of a natural place while in a building*” (SW4) and the important role the “*education system [has in] helping us integrate nature into our thinking, how we are part of it, not different or separate from it*” (SW4). Further to this was the idea of responsibility and accountability towards nature with the idea of “*care conscriptions*” (SN2) where “*people look forward to when they’re called upon, and [have] a feeling of it being an honor to serve nature and participate in co-creation and fighting for all life, and us*” (SW4).

## **Entanglement with Nature**

This theme speaks to our need to entangle our whole lives with nature, to truly transform society, including codes describing mechanisms for lifelong entanglement and recognizing that “*we are nature.*” This fundamental premise of entanglement percolated throughout the workshop, where participants spoke about the entanglement of their own lives with nature and the importance for all people to be consciously entangled with nature. This entanglement manifests in myriad ways, from the idea that “*every single member of society needs to be participating in some way in the production of the food they consume*” (SW4) to “*embedding in an individual’s psyche ... a fundamental connection to nature... from birth through totems or care for animals*” (SW4). Participants proposed that life milestones could be inextricably connected with nature. One group reflected on the idea of nature connection from “*cradle to the grave*” where they “*...imagined that by 2050 we’re all experiencing cradle to grave involvement in nature.... From the minute we’re born, there will be gardens where new mothers take their children to connect with nature, right through to workplace[s] surrounded by nature so that everyone grows up understanding that nature needs us*” (SW4).

This comment led to deeper conversations that if we are nature, then everything we produce is nature and that perhaps by expanding our limited view, we *“may help [to] create a more overarching concept”* by helping people *“think about nature as everything made around us... rather than just plants and animals – everyone and everything is from nature [including] pre-processed nature”* (SW4).

Expanding from here, it became apparent in the workshop that there is a need for meaning-making processes in future visioning to understand nature and our place in it. This transformation includes the need to learn from or, more importantly, ‘remember’ our past to transform our future. One participant talked about *“malaami,”* a term from the Gumbaynggirr Indigenous Australian language, which the participant associated with *“trusting of instinct... and remembering”* (SW4) in the context of how we relate to and care for nature. There was a sentiment that we need to go through a process of unlearning. The metaphor of *“pruning”* ourselves was used to articulate the need to trust our deep inner knowing. One participant reflected on a personal story of learning how to ‘properly’ prune a fruit tree and how she related that to just knowing, relying on her instincts to know how to carefully care for that tree (SW4, RP3). Extending from this knowledge is also the analogy of tending to our own relationship with nature to make it stronger, to *“trust our instinct to [know how to] prune, which is also about pruning ourselves”* (SW4). This observation illuminates the message of care and reciprocity with oneself and with nature, the entanglement of ourselves co-becoming with nature, and the practice of healing our relationships with nature, giving us the opportunity to flourish and thrive.

### **Multiple and More-than-human Voices**

A prominent theme throughout the workshop was the need to have multiple and diverse voices to tell the stories (past, present, and future) of our transforming relationship with nature. One participant provocatively asked the room, *“What if you had a kangaroo at the table... meaning how do we give an equal voice to non-human nature?”* (SW4, RP3). Thinking this way would help move away from human exceptionalism and elevate non-human nature in the eyes of the law. This speaks to the ‘rights of nature’ movement where *“One way to legalize care [for nature] is to introduce personhood for all living entities – such as has been done for rivers (in NZ) and other entities* (SW4, also RP3). Participants also acknowledged the trade-offs in making policy and legislative decisions to save nature because not all approaches will be beneficial to all people (SW4).

Speaking further to the need for pluralistic understanding and concepts of human-nature relationships was one participant’s provocation for the group, *“Do we have the right to impose [our] vision?”* (SW4) because without multiple voices, *“if the vision for nature doesn’t speak to people, it will fail”* (SW4). Further, *“We have some visions that are clustered together, way at one end of the spectrum... should that be the vision...how to give everyone a voice, and how do we listen...?”* (SW4). This comment highlights the important work of expanding these conversations in trusting and ethical spaces and integrating *“calmness, connectedness, agency, control and a sense of hope”* (SW4, facilitator) to achieve the goal of creating a narrative and vision that speaks to all peoples and helps redefine our relationship with nature. This, speaking to all people, could include non-traditional engagement with nature, including technology, art, and virtual reality or video games (SN2).

## **Discussion**

The transformative practice session provided two key contributions to our approach to developing a future visioning process to improve the Victorian government's biodiversity conservation policy by engaging concepts of reciprocity in societal relationships with nature. First, it was an opportunity to test an approach employing AI with participants who have expertise or experience in sustainability transformation and other fields relevant to the application of our work. This meant the feedback and discussion that developed during and after the session (i.e., in preparing this manuscript) provided insights that can improve our practice (see recommendations below). This highlights the process of continuing change that starts at the moment one asks affirmative questions (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005). These participants also proposed future visions containing elements that might not have been proposed in our usual practices (i.e., the themes described above). Hence, the AI approach allowed us to broaden our consideration of what a future visioning process could reveal by more meaningfully engaging with diverse audiences, which also allowed us to demonstrate to our government colleagues and executive leadership team the value of including diverse audiences in developing programs and policies connected to future visions.

Literature on practicing future visioning encourages the development of multiple possible future visions (Scoones et al., 2020). For our purpose, this approach is specifically relevant to considering plural values, ontologies, and human-nature relationships. It could be argued that previous visions for nature connection are limited as they are often predominantly based on Western, modernist worldviews of humans needing to 'connect to nature' (West et al. 2020; Wright et al. 2012). Such visions have potentially lost broad appeal as they fail to speak to diverse groups who do engage with nature, but through a range of ways, purposes, and needs (Escobar 1998); as one participant asked: "*Do we have the right to impose [our] vision [on others]?*" Building on diverse approaches such as storytelling may also provide ways of better integrating multiple ways of knowing and highlighting normative (transformative) visions of what should be (Nikolakis 2020). We suggest there is not 'one vision' for human-nature relationships; rather we may focus on building partnerships with local communities to develop place-based concepts of 'nature connection.' This work presents numerous challenges, including that it may be difficult to meaningfully engage diverse communities whose 'visions' we seek to understand or document, and, when they can be engaged, these deliberative co-creation processes may still marginalize and devalue diverse voices because existing social power imbalances are not 'left at the door' (Olson 2011).

## **Critical Reflections on the Process**

We also critically reflected on our AI approach to better understand its transformative potential, exploring evidence supporting or challenging possibilities for change. Participants across a range of organizations and disciplines engaged in co-crafting knowledge to build collective visions, and the findings suggested some level of diversity, which is important in future visioning approaches (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005; Nalau and Cobb, 2022). However, it is likely that participants who self-selected to participate already had strong connections with and concern for nature, as evidenced, for example, by a workshop comment about visions "*way at one end of the spectrum*" (SW4). As such, they represent one part of the system involved in transforming relationships with nature. AI, as with other future visioning and systems change methodologies, highlights the importance of having everyone

involved in the system participating in the process (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005; Nalau and Cobb 2022).

While one of the aims of our research was to learn from our participants, which included those with expertise relevant to sustainability transformations, the narrow set of voices in the room and the brief time available for discussion posed a challenge to developing truly transformational ideas. Time constraints have been acknowledged as a barrier to meaningful vision development (Nalau and Cobb 2022; Totin et al. 2018), and yet attending such a workshop at all may be difficult for participants not engaged in this space and with competing demands for their time. Additional constraints include reinforcing power imbalances (including the dominance of government representatives) and the difficulties associated with balancing Western and Indigenous knowledge systems (Nalau and Cobb, 2022). Despite this, there was evidence of powerful stories, metaphors, and imagery being generated, highlighting the extent to which participants actively engaged in co-creating the collective story.

Multiple comments from the research team also reflected this challenge around asking new questions, doing things differently, and fully articulating systems transformation. For example, following the workshops, the research team reflected on the process, with one commenting, *“I also felt the frustration with the idea of nature – and the questions we were asking have been asked for some time, and how do we think of this differently.”* With our intention to ‘stress test’ these findings with other relevant audiences (e.g., government colleagues, partner organizations, and community members), we anticipate repeating the process to generate further visioning and explore their utility in the policy. As such, we view this work as one stage in a broader process that, if realized, would provide an avenue for change. Although we do not have clear evidence of change as an outcome of this workshop, social learning and “building social networks should not be underestimated” (Nalau and Cobb 2022: 11).

In our workshop, we observed evidence of the positive emotions required to support open, generative, and constructive conversations and to generate momentum for change (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). We found evidence of this through *“enthusiastic,” “action-based discussions,”* and *“optimistic”* voices when envisioning the future (Observer). There was also evidence that workshop participants shared critical insights to engage with problems, such as the risk of failure if the community does not see themselves represented, and discussed their personal struggles towards transformation.

Finally, our vision development was somewhat high-level as opposed to being attached to a specific, localized system. However, place and scale are important factors in conceptualizing our relationships with nature. A collective community vision might yield very different results to a society-level visioning exercise, even among the same participants. For this approach to be useful in informing transformative governance, it needs to be further tested across multiple scales.

### **Insights for Transformative Governance**

This process supported us to think differently about what a vision is, the complexity of developing visions, and what friction this work entails for those of us who are government employees. Engaging with plural perspectives in imagining transformation is always political

(Scoones et al. 2020), made more challenging if operating in a problem-solving, deliberative space, using policy and governance structures to direct transformation rather than exploring what could be through possible futures (Nalau & Cobb, 2022). Governments and many organizations with low-risk tolerance may perceive involving plural voices and systems-level transformations as a risky endeavor. The transformative system change needed to realize a new vision may entail friction between different government departments and may not be politically palatable. This may leave us (as public servants) limited in the transformative changes that we can advocate for; our participants prompted us to consider how struggling to break from ‘business as usual’ thinking in these contexts might hinder visioning processes. This need not be the case. Locally, the Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrn) Act is one example of transformative policy, the first Australian legal recognition for a ‘single living and integrated natural entity,’ valuing Traditional Owner knowledge and environmental management (Bush and Doyon 2023). This is an example of governments doing things differently and of the powerful potential of transformative partnerships and of local and Indigenous voices at the table, supporting arguments to include diverse voices and different approaches in developing visions as part of a collaborative process and empowering communities for bottom-up transformational change.

The process also caused us to reflect on the purpose of a vision. For example, the vision or visions that are developed may, in themselves, not be the critical enabler, but rather, the process itself may create a deliberative space (Nalau and Cobb 2022; Nikolakis 2020). In such a space, different voices in the room can together reflect on the purpose of a policy instrument such as VVN. The vision provides something for those involved to strive for with a shared purpose. One way this was done in this workshop was by broadening the idea of ‘valuing’ nature from a traditional, Western science-influenced conservation frame to one including the multiple ways people engage positively with nature. Within this, the process revealed diverse and even contradictory ways of envisioning new relationships with nature. For example, some were seeking to elevate nature as a norm across society, embedding respect for nature, while others sought to recognize the legitimacy of plural forms of nature connections, shaping nature conservation as a government enterprise to better support those connections. Both have transformative potential, yet they have different ideological foundations, assumptions, and pathways to impact.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This workshop was intended to be an opportunity to draw in different voices and expertise to inform our approach to delivering work aligned with the Victorian Value of Nature. With this in mind, we provide some practical recommendations for others seeking to transform our collective relationship with nature, informed by AI and systems transformation practice, and our role developing, participating in, and reflecting on our workshop:

- Co-create with a diverse and inclusive group of people across the system;
- Co-develop with and embed First Nations principles of connecting with and caring for the Country (Wright et al. 2012);
- Take local and place-based approaches, e.g., supporting everyday access and meaningful interactions with nature to develop ongoing nature connection) (Lengieza et al. 2023);

- Garner support for and implement government levers through International, National, State, and local biodiversity policies and strategies focussed on people and nature connection and engagement initiatives (DELWP 2017; IPBES 2022; Lengieza et al. 2023; New Zealand Government 2020; SEI and CEEW 2022; UNEP 2021);
- Adopt an evidence-based approach to inform the people-nature dimensions of biodiversity conservation policy.

As members of a government institution (LVE, CR, FH, SB, KL, EP) seeking a transformative approach to nature conservation policy centered on human relationships with nature, we hope that such recommendations can inform the learning and development of broader policy. While currently regarded as novel, these policy approaches are growing among governance institutions in Australia and internationally. We recognize limitations to the co-creation processes recommended above, including social conflict embedded in the histories of injustice, exclusion, and erasure of Indigenous people and culture and that of other marginalized, minority communities. These problems are not easily addressed. Nonetheless, by developing and testing approaches such as AI and future visioning to inform novel policies, we hope that we may contribute to growing insights and tools that can improve the transformative potential of policy and other tools seeking to embed concepts of reciprocity in nature governance. Eventually, we hope this can become the new business as usual; with ourselves and our society entangled with nature across our lives and meaningfully incorporating multiple and non-human voices, we continue making way for further transformations of human-nature systems and policies.

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