Catalyst for Nature-centric Awareness and Governance

Supported by the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation

This article summarises the first 12 months (Nov 2024-2025) of the VKRF-funded project Catalyst for Nature-centric Awareness and Governance (or Nature-Centric Catalyst, NCC, for short).

The overarching aim of the project is to radically transform the way we govern to urgently reverse nature decline. We are seeking to look beyond governance approaches that are based on a misplaced sense of human exceptionalism and, instead, are rooted in attitudes of deep care and reverence for nature. This necessary culture change reflects growing consensus across major science policy reports from organisations such as IPBES, UNDP, UNEP, EEA, IPCC.

To help make wiser governance approaches possible, our aim is to catalyse the shift in consciousness that is already underway– towards a human identity more deeply rooted in nature. We will gather diverse research to piece together evidence-based developmental pathways that decentre the human and embrace our reintegration into the web of life, along with 'a toolkit' of alternative governance approaches that reflect this paradigm of nature-connection and accelerate nature restoration.
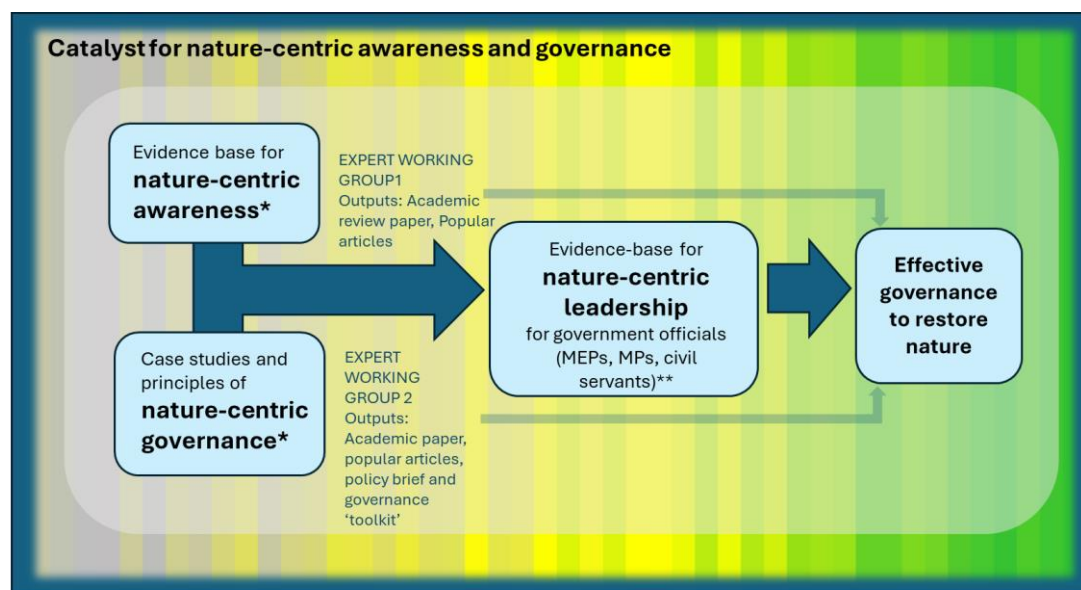

Project organisation: Details of the project team are found here. Early on in the project, we established a Steering Group comprising the former Leader of the Green Party and senior representatives from the civil service (Defra, MHCLG, Environment Agency, DESNZ), think tanks (Chatham House, The Royal Society, Inner Green Deal), and European environmental organisations (European Environment Agency, Joint Research Centre Europe).

Image credit: artist Nina Montenegro

We liaised with the steering group to review a Theory of Change (ToC) reflecting the impacts on our target stakeholders (government officials), though we recognised the potential extension of our approach to influence business, legal and education audiences in later phases (Fig. 1). We evolved this initial ToC in several ways: 1) we decided to use the term nature 'connectedness' rather than 'awareness' to reflect prevailing academic nomenclature (even though we feel that the current focus on pathways to nature connectedness is somewhat limited; see outputs); 2) rather than two separate working groups for nature connectedness and governance, we developed a series of integrated workshops focussing on different aspects of both. The workshops were as follows (held in May, June & Nov 2025, with one to follow in Feb/March 2026):

- **Mainstreaming nature-centric governance: risks, barriers and opportunities**

- **Addressing the housing crisis from a nature-centric perspective**

- **Systemic risk and effectiveness framework for environmental solutions (supported by additional funding from ARIA)**

- **Systemic risk proliferation: beyond sticking plaster fixes to nature-centric solutions**

Fig 1, Initial Theory of Change for the project

Philosophy behind the workshop design – evoking Nature-centric philosophical and spiritual shifts. Using compound effects theory, we realised that the venue and method of delivery of nature-centric approaches is an important element to having a lasting impression on attendees to the workshops. To this end, we included elements in our workshops that evoke deeper value shifts. We hosted the workshops in Nature abundant venues, with time for working outdoors ensuring Nature is felt and experienced during the day.

In addition, we facilitated nature-connection activities in collaboration with local indigenous wisdom keepers. In workshop 1, we arranged a guided nature meditation and walk on the hill behind the workshop venue, including a talk on the geology, history and mythology of the area (e.g. video). In workshop 2, we ran a sound meditation ('gong bath') after the workshop.

In the evening we ran a 'Nature-Centric Coffee House', which allowed for deeper philosophical nature connection - blending the academic workshop with philosophical enquiry. We invited artists, community activists and nature-centric practitioners. We used 'provocation' prompts left on the table to enable open debate on nature-centric approaches leading to deeper philosophical spiritual shifts through the sharing of motivations, inspirations, poetry and music.

We received very positive feedback on the way in which we blended, on the same day, an academic, analytical workshop with a more social, artistic and spiritual Coffee House, in order to combine mental and emotional engagement with nature-centric philosophy.

Fig. 2. Images from the nature-centric coffee house events following academic work

Outputs

We believe the Catalyst is beginning to make a significant impact in shaping the emerging fields of nature connectedness and nature-centric governance. We have received strong interest from a wide range of academics and those working in policy and governance settings. We have produced a number of outputs to help develop this impact, which are summarised here, with more details of each in the Appendix.

We expect the Catalyst to result in five academic articles and one book chapter, three of which relate to nature connectedness and three to nature-centric governance and associated issues:

- Pritchard, M., Tovey, P., Tickell, P. & Oliver, T. H. Catalysing Transformational Change through Compound Nature Connectedness Interventions (in press; *Ambio*)

- Pritchard, M., Briel, M., Tovey, P., Tickell, P. & Oliver, T. H. The Uses and Abuses of Immersive Technology for Nature Connectedness. In J. Reed (ed.), *Postdigital Nature Connection*. Springer (book chapter, in press)

- Pritchard, M., Briel, M., Tovey, P. & Oliver, T. H. Sparkling Facts: Revisiting the Knowledge Pathway for Nature Connectedness (drafted)

- Pritchard, M., Tickell, P., Briel, M., Tovey, P. & Oliver, T. H. What is Nature-Centric Governance? Representing Nature in an era of Ecological Crisis (in review with *Sustainability*)

- Pritchard, M., Briel, M., Tovey., P. & Oliver, T. H. Opportunities and Challenges for Introducing Nature-Centric Housing in the UK (in review with *Planning Theory*)

- Pritchard, M. Nature Representation and the Priestly Class (drafted)

Beyond these academic outputs, we have produced several lay articles. We are also working with the UK Museum for English Rural Life to host a nature-centric exhibition based on our work (opening Mar 2026).
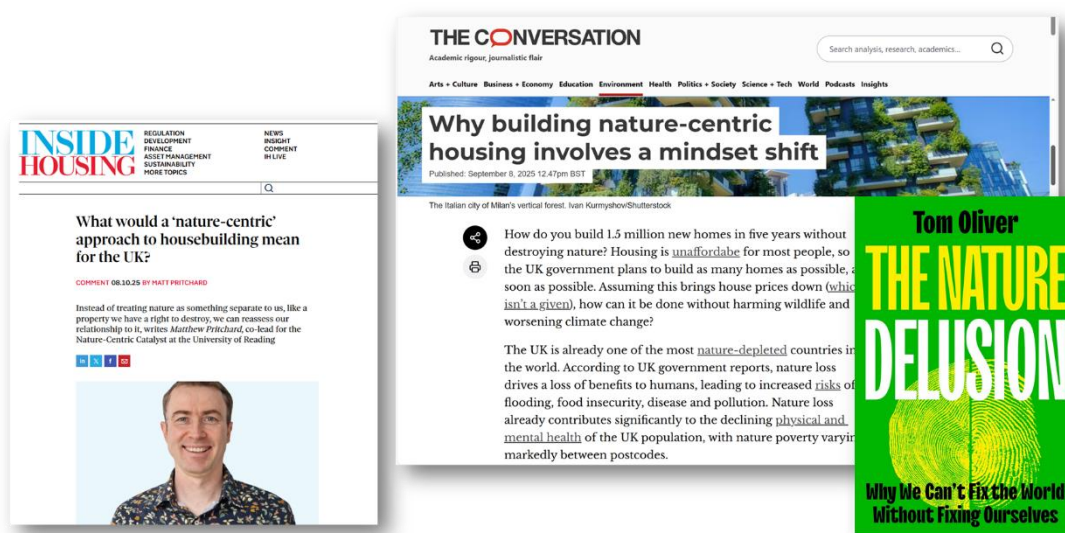
Fig 3. Lay articles produced during the project

Book

- Tom Oliver. 2026. The Nature Delusion: Why We Can't Fix the World Without Fixing Ourselves. Bristol University Press.

Popular Articles

- Tom Oliver: Why building nature-centric housing requires a mindset shift. *The Conversation,* 8 September 2025.

- Matt Pritchard: What would a 'nature-centric' approach to housebuilding mean for the UK? Inside Housing, 8 October 2025.

- Matt Pritchard: The case for nature-centric housing. Housing Quality Magazine, October 2025 edition.

- Awakening the nature-centric mindset - 'The Rethink' ASRA

- A new campaign wants to redefine the word 'nature' to include humans – here's why this linguistic argument matters The Conversation

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What should happen next?

We believe there is an explosion of interest in the environmental philosophy and practice of reconnecting to nature, particularly in the UK and Europe. In this project, we have also focussed on the associated structural/institutional changes that can reinforce, support and further catalyse this cultural shift, which is recognised as essential by major science policy organisations.

These structural changes can be guided by wisdom from traditional indigenous cultures; in combination with new scientific and social science research, they require careful consideration to apply effectively to the modern 'western' context.

Innovations such as Rights of Nature, Nature on the Board and multispecies assemblies may help not only in Government settings but also in diverse organisational settings, such as private corporations. These institutional changes, however, must be accompanied by deeper value shifts. Our project, along with others operating in this space, develops ways to challenge to the existing anthropocentric paradigm while offering evidence-based nature-centric alternative approaches.

Our offer: We would like to help organisations to implement nature-centric approaches. This would be through in person, nature-based workshops, targeting decision-makers in both public and private sectors. To appeal to this audience, the offer would be framed as next-generation approaches for nature/ecological governance, beginning with a systemic risk lens and the reports by international science organisations concluding that a transformation in mindsets and values is essential. Initial steps have been taken through current and planned presentations to: Office for Environmental Protection, EEA, Green Alliance (Nov/Dec 2025), Natural England, WWF, Defra (Jan/Feb 2026). And example presentation can be viewed here. At future workshops, we would convey the key research on pathways to develop nature connectedness, describe the various nature governance approaches and their associated advantages and challenges, provide an overview of the subject of nature representation, and discuss the role of technologies for both connectedness and governance.

We are also keen to trial the implementation of nature-centrism in organisations; for example, working with a willing government department or large corporation to test nature governance approaches in practice, perhaps alongside initiatives to grow connectedness. This would harness the work in a new VKRF grant (commencing 5th March 2026; Matt Pritchard PI) on '*Cognitive Foundations of Multispecies Organisations*,' assessing the opportunities of drawing on more-than-human intelligences in conjunction with AI, and could also utilise Marzia Briel's consultancy *Wayfinder Legal* for advising on risk and governance in transformed organisational designs.

Appendix

Nature-Centric Workshops

We held three interdisciplinary workshops, with a third planned for early 2026. The first two workshops were followed by a 'nature-centric coffee house'.

The first was titled ***Mainstreaming Nature-Centric Governance: Risks, Barriers and Opportunities***, and was held in Streatley Berkshire, UK on 13th May 2025. It aimed to generate insights that will help government and corporate practitioners to critically assess the potential for new nature-centric approaches to better represent intrinsic values of nature in decision-making. 21 attended from academia, law, activism, and national and local government. We explored four nature-centric governance approaches that have been gaining momentum in recent years – Interspecies Councils, Nature on the Board, Nature-Centric Financial Mechanisms, and Rights of Nature - and held sessions on opportunities, risks and mainstreaming challenges. It achieved cross-sector awareness-raising and community-building, and the data and insights collected informed the academic paper titled 'What is Nature-Centric Governance?'.

The second workshop, titled ***Addressing the Housing Crisis from a Nature-Centric Perspective***, was held at the Thames Lido, Reading, UK on 5th June 2025. We explored visions for nature-centric approaches to the housing crisis and tested them against the challenges of the current paradigm, thereby assessing nature-centric philosophy against a live policy issue. 22 people participated from academia, planning, architecture, design, consulting, and national and local government. Facilitated by Leading Through Storms CIC, we used the Three Horizons approach to structure sessions about the future and identify possible pathways towards the vision we hold for nature-centric housing. As before, the workshop raised awareness and further built developed the nature-centric community, especially as it relates to housing.

The third workshop **Systemic risk and effectiveness framework for environmental solutions** was supported by additional funding from ARIA. The aim was to determine which environmental solutions have high risks and what the mitigations are. We risk assessed three solution spaces: Biodiversity net gain; Transgenic species and Rights of Nature. We had attendees from Politics, Law, Social, Economists, Technology, Environment, Government Policy and Funding, Future Generations and Nature to assess the risks and mitigations.

The fourth workshop **Systemic risk proliferation: beyond sticking plaster fixes to nature-centric solutions** will be held in February/March 2026 and conclude the project by inviting a diverse range of UK policy-makers and environmental policy NGOs to discuss the implications of our findings and how to optimise the value of a related training package.

Academic Outputs

We expect the Catalyst to result in five academic articles and one book chapter, three of which relate to nature connectedness and three to nature-centric governance and associated issues:

- Pritchard, M., Tovey, P., Tickell, P. & Oliver, T. H. Catalysing Transformational Change through Compound Nature Connectedness Interventions (in press with *Ambio*)

  Abstract: Political, economic and technological interventions are struggling to address the polycrisis at the necessary scale and pace. Increasing nature connectedness can make a critical contribution: there is abundant evidence that higher levels of nature connectedness are not only good for health and happiness, but also correlate with a greater commitment to pro-environmental behaviours. The early progress in the scientific study of nature connectedness is impressive, but there are many types of interventions promoting nature

connectedness, and evidence is fragmented across academic disciplines and siloed communities of practice. Here, we review a wide range of interventions and their effectiveness relative to each other. We appraise how interventions can be combined synergistically with the potential to catalyse shifts to pro-environmental mindsets through a concept of compounding effects. We conclude by discussing how our insights may inform the development of more holistic training and development approaches, as a critical element of sustainability transformations.

- Pritchard, M., Briel, M., Tovey, P., Tickell, P. & Oliver, T. H. The Uses and Abuses of Immersive Technology for Nature Connectedness. In J. Reed (ed.), *Postdigital Nature Connection*. Springer (book chapter, in press)

  Abstract: Augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), computer gaming and human augmentation are increasingly pervasive in education, including environmental education at a time of increasingly grave crises for nature, climate and pollution. We critically review the current literature on whether these immersive technologies can increase nature connectedness - an attitude important for well-being and pro-environmental behaviours such as protecting declining species, addressing habitat decline, and mitigating climate change - and under which circumstances they do so. We assess the opportunities and risks involved when such technologies are deployed to deepen nature engagement, explore nature scenarios, and broaden nature perspectives, as well as some of the indirect implications of their use. We conclude that numerous genuine opportunities exist, but the risks need to be carefully understood and mitigated for the benefits for nature connectedness to be realised. Finally, we offer some principles for technology developers seeking to increase nature connectedness and for those applying technologies for nature connection in educational settings, and suggest priorities for further research.

- Pritchard, M., Briel, M., Tovey, P. & Oliver, T. H. Sparkling Facts: Revisiting the Knowledge Pathway for Nature Connectedness (drafted)

  Abstract: There is a growing recognition of the importance of nature connectedness as a motivator for pro-environmental behaviours and as a source of physical and mental health. However, some empirical research into 'pathways for nature connectedness' has concluded that the knowledge pathway – being aware of and reflecting upon facts about nature - is not effective in building nature connectedness. This is problematic in relation to a combination of anecdotal, theoretical and preliminary empirical evidence suggesting that information about nature may play a significant role in fostering nature connectedness. We suggest that the alleged ineffectiveness of the knowledge pathway may be due to methodological issues, including the particular facts chosen for investigation and the application in this context of the routine scientific approach of 'isolate to investigate,' where the latter is confounded by embodied cognition research demonstrating that ideas and emotions cannot be meaningfully separated due to the neurophysiological continuities between brains and emotional systems. We therefore conclude that further investigations are needed in order to evaluate the knowledge pathway.

- Pritchard, M., Tickell, P., Briel, M., Tovey, P. & Oliver, T. H. What is Nature-Centric Governance? Representing Nature in an era of Ecological Crisis (in review with *Sustainability*)

  Abstract: Organisations depend on nature which, as the essential foundation of civilisation, provides all the basic resources that enable organisational activity. At the same time, organisations have failed to recognise this interdependence, contributing to the large-scale destruction of nature. Nature is primarily seen as a commodity to be exploited, not a

stakeholder with intrinsic value independent of any benefits for humans or one with interests to be represented in decision-making. However, we are witnessing a 'new era' of emerging nature-positive business management and governance approaches that seek to represent nature in more direct ways, potentially creating avenues for genuine regeneration of healthy ecosystems. We held a workshop with academics, lawyers, activists and representatives from national and local government, in order to review four such approaches - More-Than-Human Assemblies, Board Nature Representation, Nature-Centric Financial Mechanisms and Rights of Nature. We propose a new Effectiveness Framework for evaluating them, and based on our assessment of the four approaches, explore how they might be enhanced. Our Framework has implications for governance both at the level of organisational (re)design and for government policymakers who may seek to facilitate emergence of these new nature-centric governance approaches in private, public and third sector institutions.

- Pritchard, M., Briel, M., Tovey., P. & Oliver, T. H. Opportunities and Challenges for Introducing Nature-Centric Housing in the UK (in review with *Planning Theory*)

  Abstract: The UK Government plans to enable construction of 1.5 million homes in the next five years in one of the most Nature-depleted countries in the world, enabled by a Planning and Infrastructure Bill. Ministers assert this will be a 'win-win' for housing and Nature, but major wildlife organisations reject this claim based on the prospect of weaker Nature protections. To test if better 'win-wins' were available, we held a workshop in June 2025 with academics (ecology, law, planning and the built environment), national and local government representatives, architects, designers and consultants to explore visions for Nature-centric housing. We identified various interventions, some currently implemented, others in germinal phases, and assessed their potential to advance a Nature-centric housing vision versus reinforcing the status quo. These interventions span financial mechanisms, regulation, novel polycentric governance approaches and local community initiatives. In this paper we discuss how careful fostering of promising interventions can help unlock the housing crisis in a way that does not compromise the integrity of Nature on which national prosperity depends.

- Pritchard, M. Nature Representation and the Priestly Class (drafted)

  Abstract: As the ecological crisis unfolds, there are increasing attempts to ensure that the voice of nature is represented in decision-making. Whether this involves the interests of individual species, natural phenomena like rivers or nature in its totality, debates ensue around the kinds of knowledge needed to represent nature, and who possesses it. Nature representation cannot be seen as simply the representation of another interest group, because what is represented is the greater whole of which we are a part and upon which we entirely depend, and for many people this holds enormous - perhaps ultimate - spiritual significance. Current and likely future debates on who can speak for nature carry echoes, in this modern secular context, with politico-theological questions over who is qualified to mediate with the divine, including arguments that erupted during the Protestant Reformation around the authority of the Catholic priesthood. Comparisons with those arguments may help to anticipate and mitigate conflicts over who has spiritual access to, epistemic authority about and hence representation rights for nature. More generally, this exercise spurs a dialogue between science and religion over how to navigate situations where scientists or other groups with potentially relevant insight may claim to have a prerogative in understanding and choosing responses to what is considered divine at a time of ecological breakdown and mass extinction.

Credit: artist Nina Montenegro

To follow progress on the Nature-Centric Catalyst project keep an eye on our webpage and sign up for further updates here.