"If we had no flowers..." Children, Nature, and Aesthetics

Elfriede Billmann-Mahecha
Institute for Educational Psychology
Leibniz University of Hanover, Germany
billmann@psychologie.uni-hannover.de

Ulrich Gebhard
Department of Educational Sciences
University of Hamburg, Germany

Abstract: The aim of this qualitative study, based on 57 group discussions with children, is the theoretical classification of a child’s empirically determined aesthetics of nature. We present our results in two steps. First, we analyze the statements made by children with respect to the aesthetics of nature in light of prominent stances toward the same. Second, we introduce two exemplary case studies and interpret the children’s statements in relation to the stances discussed as well as to a model of the development of aesthetic judgment. The results show that the aesthetics of nature holds for children in the subcategories “beauty of nature,” “aesthetization as moralization,” “nature as life enrichment,” and “nature as atmosphere.”

In a previous study (Billmann-Mahecha, Gebhard, & Nevers, 1998; Gebhard, Nevers, & Billmann-Mahecha, 2003; Nevers, Billmann-Mahecha, & Gebhard, 2006; Nevers, Gebhard & Billmann-Mahecha, 1997), we examined children’s and adolescents’ value systems and interpretations in response to dilemmas involving an ethics of nature. Using grounded theory, we categorized children’s perceptions of nature into four categories (anthropomorphic, mechanistic, instrumental patterns of interpretation, as well as aesthetic relations to nature) and related them to corresponding value systems.

One of the important results of our research was that the anthropomorphization of nature is associated with a moralization of nature (Gebhard, Nevers, & Billmann-Mahecha, 2003). We understand anthropomorphization as symbolization as defined by Boesch (1991), whereby natural phenomena obtain emotional valence through symbolic interpretations. Besides anthropomorphization, we were able to establish that children—presumably based on knowledge they acquired in school—also regard nature as a source of things that are indispensable to life, for example, when they refer to trees as important suppliers of oxygen.

Beyond the anthropomorphic, mechanistic, and instrumental view, children frequently regard “nature” as something “really beautiful” and worthy of being preserved precisely by virtue of its beauty. In addition, one can play outdoors and relax there; nature gives people pleasure. One can construe this kind of relationship to nature as “life-enriching.” We assume that the experience of nature is important for the emotional development as well as for the mental and physical health of children. The symbolic and aesthetic valence of experiences of nature is also important.

The experience of nature becomes personally meaningful and thus an element of identity development through symbolizing interpretations of nature (e.g., anthropomorphisms) (Gebhard et al., 2003). Nature can become a symbolic reflection of a human being, and for this reason, personal aspects emerge or become accessible in relationship to nature. In a symbolic way, one feels “referred to” and addressed while experiencing nature. This also applies to the impact of landscapes as well as to relationships to pets, animals, and plants, which are subjectively interpreted as meaningful. This symbolic use of nature is also an essential element of the experience of the “beauty of nature.” We will explicate this type of aesthetic experience in conversations with children.

Conceptual Comments

Several conceptual comments are necessary in order to understand the general framework of our thesis. Since antiquity, various disciplines in Western culture have struggled to establish a definition of aesthetics. On the one hand—in the broadest sense—some of these attempts embrace everything that is sensuously perceptible, and on the other hand—in a more narrow sense—only those perceptions or experience associated with desire or uninterested pleasure are considered aesthetics.
Since the establishment of psychology as a scientific discipline, psychological aesthetics has also struggled to define aesthetics. Psychological aesthetics includes both a broad concept of aesthetics—for instance, general laws of perception, i.e., laws that are invariant with respect to culture and education—as well as an individual, more narrow concept of aesthetics, for example, aesthetic preferences associated with differences in personality, age, gender, intelligence, social background, etc., as well as the development of aesthetic activities and aesthetic appreciation and the therapeutic impact of art.

The questions and concepts under which education examines aesthetics are equally diverse. On a general level, for example, there is a concept of education that includes aesthetics (e.g., Schäfer, 1995). At another, more practical level, the focus is on aesthetic education that addresses the whole person in his or her cultural and social relations by selecting and making available spaces for aesthetic experiences. “Aesthetic experience” is understood as a co-action of sensuous perception, feeling, and reflection that, compared to other experiences, is pleasure-oriented and pure, that is, not related to one’s immediate everyday life. The pleasurable viewing of a painting would therefore be an aesthetic experience, while viewing a street map would not.

We would like to align ourselves with this latter concept of aesthetic experience. For our concern, it does not seem useful to base our thesis on a comprehensive concept of aesthetics that includes everything that is sensuously perceptible. In order to extract the essence of what lends the perception of nature an aesthetic quality and distinguishes it from purely cognitive, instrumental-rational perception, we require a more narrow definition of the concept. A concept of aesthetics that does not establish a definition but is to be understood in the sense of a sensitizing theoretical conceptual framework also associates emotional and reflective components with sensuous perception. What is meant here is that sensuous perception becomes aesthetic perception in that it is associated with emotional states of mind that are in turn triggered on or off or accompanied by cognitive processes of evaluation. In this sense, without an appreciable emotional component, the “mere” perception of something (and its cognitive evaluation) is not aesthetic perception.

Aesthetic Development

While the development of aesthetic production, in particular the development of the child’s drawing, has been relatively well researched, we know very little about the development of aesthetic reception, although everyone who deals closely with children will endorse Martin Schuster’s statement: “It is surprising how early children experience strong aesthetic feelings that for the most part relate to things in nature and colors” (Schuster, 2000, p. 198 [trans. by the authors]; cf. also the examples listed in Gebhard, 2009).

However, the receptive aesthetic experiences of children are only accessible empirically if they express them in language. Even when children express their aesthetic impressions in the form of their own aesthetic productions, e.g., in drawings, an interpretation of the experiences they are based on can only be successful if we enter into a dialogue with the child about his or her drawing (cf. Billmann-Mahecha, 2005a as well as the striking example in Neuss, 1999).

For this reason, it therefore seems justified to us to first examine the available empirical investigations of the aesthetic judgment of children that explicitly address children’s linguistic comments. These studies do not, however, make reference to objects from nature, but primarily to works of visual art. Relevant approaches orient themselves toward, among others, Piaget’s model of stages of cognitive development and toward Kohlberg’s model of stages of moral development. An example of this is the study conducted by Parsons (1987), which he presents as an application of Kohlberg’s theoretical model to the area of aesthetics. The empirical basis of the study was more than 300 semistructured interviews about a series of paintings, interviews that Parsons conducted over ten years in the United States with people of all ages and levels of education. The conversations about certain pictures by Picasso, Goya, Renoir, Albright, Klee, Chagall, and Bellows proved to be particularly interesting (cf. Parsons, 1987, p. 18), and these interviews formed the basis for the development of the model. The stages of aesthetic development formulated by Parsons assume an increasing “decentering” of individual preferences and depicted contents and a corresponding increasing social orientation. The five stages are as follows (for a more detailed characterization, cf. Parsons, 1987):

1. **Favoritism.** In this stage, the children form a judgment solely in view of whether they themselves like the pictures based on colors or the depicted content (subjective preference).

2. **Beauty and realism.** The basis for the aesthetic judgment in this stage is the view that “A painting is best if it is about beautiful things and if it pictures them realistically” (ibid., p. 39).

3. **Expressiveness.** In this stage, children/adolescents attempt to recognize what the artist wanted to express. The assessment criteria are no longer bound to content.
(4) Style and form. In this stage, the interpretation of the picture is situated within the framework of a historical-social art discourse. A connection takes place between the subjective and the socially communicated view of the picture.

(5) Autonomy. In this—according to Kohlberg: post-conventional—stage, aesthetic judgments are no longer based on the authority of the art-historical discourse valid at any one time; rather, the discourse itself is reflected on in order to form an autonomous opinion.

As the title of the fifth stage already suggests, according to Parsons, this is an aesthetic opinion in a complete sense. An autonomous opinion of this kind based on knowledge about art-historical traditions and their historical-social evaluation (stage 4) is the implicit normative aim of the development of aesthetic judgment.

Parsons explains his developmental model, by making, among other things, reference to Habermas’ three value spheres, each of which follows its own developmental logic, namely logical-scientific thought, legal-moral thought, and aesthetic thought (cf. Habermas, 1984). Whether Parsons’ model can also be applied to the aesthetic judgment of objects in nature is an interesting empirical question. We suspect that theoretically equivalent aesthetic judgments about nature can actually be formulated and empirically substantiated. With respect to children’s judgments, there are clues to this above all in stages 1 and 2 (see below). When children, for instance, express the immediately perceived beauty of a meadow, we can refer to that as an aesthetic judgment in stage 1; however, if at Christmas they prefer a real fir tree over an artificial one and say it is nicer because it is real, that would be—figuratively—an aesthetic judgment in stage 2: to the children, the real fir tree symbolizes what they associate with a Christmas tree in a more realistic way than an artificial tree could. The same holds true for the comparison of natural meadows (from an adult’s perspective) with well-kept lawns.

The Aim of the Study

The aim of our qualitative study is to describe more precisely the aesthetic components of a child’s relationship to nature. Against the background of numerous empirical findings (e.g., Gebhard, 2009; Kahn & Kellert, 2002; Korpela, Kyttä & Hartig, 2002; Kuo & Faber Taylor, 2004), our thesis is that the emotional value of “nature” lies in its ambivalent dual nature: it conveys the experience of continuity and thus security while at the same time being continuously new. The experience of nature corresponds to a fundamental desire for familiarity and bonding and at the same time to an equally fundamental attitude of curiosity. We assume that the experience of outer nature is also meaningful for the development of the inner (emotional) nature of human beings. Specifically, the experience of nature is thought to have a positive influence on subjective well-being and health. Exposure to unspoiled nature, such as meadows, fields, trees, and woods, has an invigorating effect, thus increasing subjective well-being. In addition, nature experiences have been shown to enhance recovery from mental fatigue (cf. Kaplan, 2001) and stress. Even though most studies in this regard focus on adults, these findings also tend to apply to children (cf. Faber Taylor & Kuo, 2006). The question arises more and more frequently whether alienation from nature has a negative emotional and somatic impact, that is, makes one ill or diminishes well-being. There is even talk of a Nature Deficit Syndrome (NDS) among children (Louv, 2005; Faber Taylor, Kuo & Sullivan, 2001).

For this qualitative study, we pursue the question: to what extent can children’s relationship to nature be understood as an aesthetic one? By interpreting children’s statements, we analyze the aesthetic dimension of a child’s perception of nature, and in the process also deal with the question: To what extent does a child’s aesthetics of nature include ethical connotations?

We are entering unchartered territory with this research in two respects: first, the current discourse on approaches to the aesthetics of nature does not relate to children; ontogenetic issues do not play a role. Second, existing research on aesthetic development does not make reference to nature, but primarily to the reception and production of visual art and—less frequently—music.

Method

The Group Discussion Method

Data were gathered using the group-discussion method (Billmann-Mahecha, 2005b; Kölbl & Billmann-Mahecha, 2005). The group discussion is a method “in which communication processes, whose development and structure—at least in phases—come close to a ‘normal’ conversation, are initiated in a group by someone outside the group” (Loos & Schäffer 2001, p. 13 [trans. by the authors]).

While contemporary qualitative social research group discussions are principally carried out with adults and adolescents, Philosophy for Children (cf., e.g., Horster, 1992; Lipman & Sharp, 1978; Matthews, 1980) has suggested dis-
cussing philosophical problems in groups, orientated towards the Socratic Method. The Socratic Method has the aim of stimulating the participants in a discussion to reflect independently on a mutual subject solely by means of questions. Experience published to date with children’s discussion groups analyzed within a philosophical context (e.g., Matthews, 1984) and the initial results of the implementation of this form of discussion as an instrument of qualitative investigation (e.g., Billmann-Mahecha & Hausen, 2005) persuaded us to also work with the group discussion method.

For our investigations, we presented children and adolescents of three age groups, 7–9, 10–13, and 14–18 with dilemmas in terms of nature ethics in which the interests of natural objects (an animal, a plant, or an ecosystem) were to be weighed against the interests of children and adolescents (e.g., playing, recreation). To initiate a discussion, a story was read involving a conflict of interests between children or adolescents, on the one hand, and a nonhuman natural entity, on the other. Each story centers around a conflict such as it might occur in the everyday experience of children.

In order to ensure relevance to children’s experience, the dilemmas regarding the interests of the children and youths were formulated dependent on their respective ages (e.g., a child’s interest in a playground or an adolescent’s interest in a youth club). Each of the groups investigated discussed a dilemma focusing on either the interest of plants, animals, or ecosystems. The three dilemmas used in this study are included in the Appendix: “The Tree House” and “The Fir Tree” with respect to plants and “The Adventure Playground” with regard to ecosystems. In our material, aesthetic statements made by children predominantly refer to plants, in part to ecosystems, but almost never to animals (as an example for our dilemmas with respect to animals see “Hornet’s Lives” in the Appendix).

**Participants**

Investigators contacted teachers at 46 primary and 37 middle and high schools (public schools) within the context of teacher training in two German cities. The teachers made it possible to carry out the investigation in their classrooms with small groups (peer groups). Participation in the groups was voluntary. The data were collected anonymously. The discussion leaders were students of education who were prepared for this task in special seminars and supervised. In this way, we obtained an extensive archive of 130 transcribed group discussions, of which 57 have been analyzed in greater depth, at least five for each of the three major objects and age groups. Each group consisted of about five children or youths.

The children and youths included in the investigation live in two large German cities. These cities are noteworthy for their extensive green corridors, expanses of water, and urban woods that children, their families, and schools use for outings. Thus with respect to nature, we judge that the children have a medium degree of experience: they neither grow up in purely rural areas nor are they exclusively familiar with concrete, buildings, and streets.

**Data Analysis**

We conducted a hermeneutic evaluation of the text data according to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). The group discussions were recorded on tape, transcribed, and analyzed sentence by sentence. This includes (1) open coding, (2) summarizing prominent themes, i.e., giving a structured overview of the main topics that were addressed, (3) reducing the empirical material further by means of synopses of the thematic summaries, (4) analyzing selected passages in depth (case studies), and (5) developing theoretically relevant categories. One of the theoretical categories developed out of the material in this way is the aesthetic perception of nature by children that is described here.

The selection of group discussions for data evaluation took place according to the theoretical sampling method, i.e., a series of group discussions was collected and transcribed and the analysis begun concurrently. Then in the course of the analysis, other discussions that had already been transcribed were brought in until no further findings were obtained in terms of value systems and patterns of interpretation with respect to the various dilemmas in the different age groups. In the analysis of the group discussions, the stop criterion was theoretical saturation (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 2007). The distribution of the fifty-seven group discussions with a total of 287 children and adolescents (48% of which were girls) is listed in Table 1.

As the recent discussion on the methodology of grounded theory has shown, it is not possible to approach the evaluation of the empirical material completely free of theory (cf. Kelle, 2005). Rather, a certain theoretical sensitivity is required. Accordingly, the initial evaluations on the extraction of the central categories (anthropomorphic, mechanistic, instrumental patterns of interpretation, and aesthetic relations to nature) took place against the background of the knowledge and reflection of various theoretical approaches to the subject of the child and nature without a specific concept directing the evaluation.
Table 1. Number of group discussions analyzed according to age group and focus of the dilemma discussed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Groups</th>
<th>Plants</th>
<th>Animals</th>
<th>Ecosystem</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age Group 1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–9 years old</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Group 2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–13 years old</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Group 3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14–18 years old</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A detailed analysis of the aesthetic relations to nature then took place that was more strongly oriented toward theory, albeit with continued openness to discovering additional relevant concepts or categories. This analysis led us to draw on Parsons’ model of aesthetic development (see the Introduction). As the analyses showed, the children’s statements can be interpreted within the scope of this model; however, when applying this model, we found that with reference to nature, the children primarily argue in stages 1 and 2. For this reason, we also drew upon classic and contemporary theories of aesthetics. In order to shed light on the children’s statements in terms of theory as an aid in comparing interpretations, we discuss relevant theories in combination with illustrative children’s statements. For example, in a first step (Results I), we analyze the statements made by children with respect to the aesthetics of nature in light of four prominent theoretical stances toward the same: beauty as the classic core concept of aesthetics; aesthetization as moralization; extension of the concept of aesthetics to life enrichment; and atmosphere as a core concept of a new aesthetics.

In a second step (Results II), we introduce two exemplary case studies and interpret the children’s statements in relation to the stances mentioned as well as to Parsons’ model of the development of aesthetic judgment. In addition, the case studies show microgenetic processes that in a child’s peer interactions can lead to the development of attitudes, value systems, and patterns of interpretation. According to Vygotsky (1978), microgenetic processes in the context of social interactions are the basis of macrodevelopmental changes. Microgenetic designs like group discussions with children give us insight into an aspect of children’s culture, which is an essential context of individual development, not only important aside from school and the parental home, but just as important as the institutional contexts of school and family life (cf., e.g., Krappmann, Uhlendorff, & Oswald, 1999).

Group discussions enable heightened insight into the processes of social negotiations, because in group discussions, children refer primarily to each other and less to the discussion leader. Effective group discussions require a discussion stimulus that is relevant to children’s everyday experiences and a non-directive, open manner of discussion that enables children to emphasize their own topics. In the development of discussion content, one can observe which experiences and knowledge children contribute to a topic, which arguments they use to attempt to convince one other, whether and how they achieve a consensus, or how they deal with opinions that do not correspond with those held by the group majority. The group discussions with children, who also constitute a previously existing group in everyday life, thus provide us with insight not only into their opinions and values regarding certain subjects, but also into the way in which they assert, reverse, align, and further develop these within the peer group (cf. Billmann-Mahecha, 2005b).

Group effects, in both experimental settings and everyday experience, show that people express different opinions about identical topics in different social situations. One aspect of our social competence is that we adapt our stories and our opinions to the respective situation and to our partners in conversation. However, if we take into account that a person is bound from birth to a social network with rules, values, and world views that have been (sub)culturally molded, which in the course of one’s life becomes more differentiated and in which one becomes more and more actively involved (cf. e.g. Bruner 1990), then the common differentiation between private and public opinion appears highly artificial. Opinions and values do not emerge purely individually in a social vacuum, nor are they forced on us. Rather they are brought about and developed within a social context of common experience. Opinions, attitudes, and values are not irrevocably fixed at a certain point in an individual’s development, but rather—with
the exception of a few items of basic stock (such as e.g., certain moral principles)—change, sometimes gradually and sometimes abruptly, in a communicative exchange with significant others in common social contexts and as an individual gains life experience. The social influence observed is then not a product of the specifically arranged investigative situation such as that in the social psychological experiments, nor is it an accidently achieved, virtually random result. Rather it is the expression of those micro-processes of the social formation of opinions that are also in effect in the everyday lives of the group participants investigated.

Results I: A Child’s Aesthetic Judgments of Nature
as They Relate to Theories about the Aesthetics of Nature

Beauty as the Classic Core Concept of Aesthetics

(Philosophical) aesthetics has always examined the concept of beauty and attempted to define it in varying ways. As a result of insights into the subjective relativity and historicity of what is termed “beautiful” and why, modern conceptions of aesthetics attempt to completely dispense with the concept or the idea of beauty. However, because beauty plays a central role in both our everyday understanding of aesthetics as well as in children’s aesthetic judgments of nature, we believe it makes sense to consider beauty as a classic core concept of aesthetics in our empirical analyses. In order to do so, the psychological differentiation suggested by Neumaier (1999) could be useful: it does not address the outer attributes of an object, but different human-object relationships:

- We refer to something as “beautiful” if the respective object has something we desire.
- We refer to something as “beautiful” if we experience the object’s appeal as something delightful.
- We refer to something as “beautiful” if we admire the object—at a distance to our desire—based solely on its attributes.

In our empirical material, there are a number of statements made by children with respect to the beauty of nature that can be interpreted in one or more of these three ways:

Stephanie (10 years old): For me, nature looks good. If there was no nature, that wouldn’t be nice; then there wouldn’t be any animals.

Lukas (8 years old): We have plants everywhere, even in our winter garden, and we have three apple trees, too. It looks much nicer when you have plants. It looks ugly if you don’t.

Frank (10 years old): My grandma has nettles. My grandma has everything. Do you know how nice that is?

Kristin (9 years old): And flowers, and then all the animals, and that it looks really nice, too, and that the animals have their freedom, too.

The third aspect of Neumaier’s (1999) psychological differentiation described above—admiration of an object for its attributes—in particular overlaps with an ethical position, in which respect and acknowledgement of the other plays a central role. In our case, the “other” is nature; what is being addressed here is therefore the—certainly not sufficient, but not to be neglected—aspect of respecting nature due to the beauty that is attributed to it. An example:

Mareike (10 years old): There are really nice trees, too, where I go horseback riding, and they’re building something there . . ., and they’re all being cut down little by little, and I think you should be happy if there’s still something there.

Aesthetization as Moralization

The view that moral aspects can be part of an aesthetic perception of nature can be thought in two ways: on the one hand, there is the thought, originating with Kant (1790/2008), that the beauty of nature promotes human morality itself. On the other hand, a central argument for the conservation of nature itself can be seen in the aesthetic perception of nature. In this respect then, nature is moralized in that it in some measure becomes a moral object by means of an aesthetic interpretation. Neither of these two aspects has been sufficiently investigated empirically. However, for the qualitative analysis of our group discussions, the second aspect proves to be a category that is rich in content and theoretically relevant.

Kant’s thoughts on the beauty of nature and its connection with sublimity are described in his The Critique of Judgement (1790/2008). Kant argues that there is a correlation between the esteem for natural beauty and a moral attitude, namely “that to take an immediate interest in the beauty of nature . . . is always a mark of a good soul; and that, where this interest is habitual, it is at least indicative of a temper of mind favourable to the moral feeling that it should readily associate itself with the contemplation of nature” (Kant, 2008, p. 93). In The Critique of Judgement (Kant, p. 86), Kant conjectures that “If, surrounded by a beautiful nature, [man] finds himself in
peaceful and cheerful enjoyment of his existence, he feels a need to be thankful to someone for it.” This gratitude—even if it may be accompanied by religious feelings—could be transformed into moral feelings or motivations.

Admittedly, the Kantian argument that humans themselves are ennobléd by the beauty of nature is rather subordinate in contemporary discourse on the aesthetics of nature. We do not find any indication of this theme in our empirical material. Rather, we find that a nature worthy of protection is frequently associated with the aesthetic perception of nature. In this respect, it is an issue of the moralization of nature itself and not of humankind. What supports this is the view that—as ecological, economic, and ethical arguments for conserving nature may be disputed on logical grounds—the only argument for the protection of nature that remains is its beauty.

For this reason, aesthetic arguments are regarded as the strongest arguments for conserving nature (e.g., Birnbacher, 1980). Thus, in the case of a moralization of this kind, which is aligned with the aesthetics of nature, nature is interpreted as worthy of conservation. Despite the associated anthropocentric perspective, here nature seems to be a moral object that also has moral status in its own right, which becomes evident with the aesthetic perspective. Habermas ends his Remarks on Discourse Ethics with the remark that “in the aesthetic experience of nature, things withdraw into an unapproachable autonomy and inaccessibility; they then exhibit their fragile integrity so clearly that they strike us as unavoidable in their own right and not merely as desirable elements of a preferred form of life” (Habermas, 1993, p. 111). Some landscape designers and ecologists argue that we first of all become conscious of the destruction of the natural landscape aesthetically (Nennen, 1991).

For Martin Seel, however, what Habermas terms “preferred form of life” becomes the main argument for dealing with nature in terms of moral criteria (see below). Seel is linking the aesthetics of nature to a successful, good life. Nature should therefore be preserved or protected, because a beautiful nature provides space for liberated and non-instrumental human lifestyles. Thus the conservation of nature becomes “a dictate of social and political respect as opposed to the potential of individual development” (Seel, 1991, p. 341 [trans. by the authors]). This argument, which is bound to an aesthetics-of-nature ethics, places human beings at the center of moralization: nature is to be conserved for the sake of human beings’ good lives, and not for its own sake.

One problem needs to be pointed out: if aesthetics is judged to be “mere pretense,” the line of argument for the conservation of nature based on aesthetic experience becomes flawed and deceptive (see Birnbacher, 1980; Krebs, 1997; Seel, 1991). The problem with this is that appreciation for the beauty of nature is highly culturally relative. “We can reconstruct the ideals of an aesthetics of nature in terms of cultural history, but we can hardly anticipate them prognostically” (Ott, 1998, 226 [trans. by the authors]). Von der Pfordten (1996) shows how the prevailing taste in terms of an aesthetics of nature was subject to constant historical and cultural change, and, because of this, he considers arguments for the conservation of nature based on an aesthetics of nature to be weak.

Children also seem to be aware of the relativity of what is referred to as “really beautiful” in nature. In a conversation between children, for example, four ten-year-olds talked at length about whether one should distinguish between weeds and flowers, or which distinctions one should make. A short excerpt from the conversation:

Manuel: Why can’t you call weeds nice flowers? They’re not ugly at all! . . .

Frank: What’s the difference between a flower and a weed? There isn’t one. They’re both just like trees.

David: Or when you see a flower—lately I wanted to pick one—then you say: “Don’t bother, it looks really nice.” Why don’t you say that when I pull weeds? . . .

Mareike: I pull weeds. Everybody has a different taste. Should I pull the roses so that the weeds can grow, or the weeds so that the roses can grow?

David: No!

Manuel: You don’t pick anything, and then both things can grow.

What is interesting for our study, however, is that with respect to the question of the preservation or conservation of nature, aesthetic arguments also play a role. In the case of the question of whether a tree that threatens to fall onto a house should be cut down, children in another conversation put forward the idea of somehow propping the tree up. Among other things, the eleven-year-olds cite the following reasons:

Julia: Because it’s really nice.

Svenja: Because it’s good anyway . . . to have a picnic under or climb.

Anna: Yes, and because I think there are memories. And for every tree we saw down, we have less oxygen.

Extension of the Concept of Aesthetics to Life Enrichment
For Martin Seel, the experience of the beauty of nature becomes a more or less essential condition of succeeding in living a “good life.” This approach in terms of the aesthetics of nature is relevant to our study in that not only aesthetic value judgments, but also aspects of a life that is “good” and enriched by the experience of nature are taken into account. A series of empirical studies on the significance of experiences of nature for emotional development confirm that this perspective is relevant to children playing in nature (Gebhard, 2009).

This valence of experiences in nature can become an “attraction of aesthetic nature” (Seel, 1991, p. 106 [trans. by the authors]) that is at the same time an “accent to human existence that is unintentionally endowed with meaning” (ibid.). “In this sense, the presence of the beauty of nature is directly and indirectly good, thus experiencing it is a positive existential experience (ibid., p. 303).

Seel (1991) makes a distinction between three ways of aesthetically-sensuously perceiving nature: “contemplation” as a mode of encountering nature that is devoid of meaning, “correspondence” as a mode of encountering nature that is meaningful, and “imagination” as a mode of encountering nature that is pictorial. The unhindered and uplifted interplay of these components constitutes what is good about the aesthetic perception of nature and a corresponding life. An experience of this kind is uplifting and valuable for its own sake. Every human being should therefore have the opportunity of having it.

Contemplative Perception of Nature

“Contemplative perception lingers with the phenomena that its object possesses; it indulges in the distinctions that it gets out of the object without striving for an interpretation beyond them. Its encounter with the phenomenon disregards its meaning” (ibid., p. 39). This kind of perception is of natural phenomena that are free of meaning and should not be confused with any kind of mystical or magic view of nature. “Purely contemplative perception is not directed toward the extrasensory world, it is directed toward the sensory world. Therein lies its intelligence: in a world that is frequently interpreted not to go the path toward interpretation, toward ideas, toward the whole; not to relate anything to what one has viewed except to the view itself” (ibid., p. 83).

The contemplative perception of nature was also found in the conversations among children in our study, as the following two examples illustrate:

Timo (11 years old, on conserving an old orchard): I think you’d think it was really nice, too, if a hundred wild geese fly over you.

Lukas (11 years old): And when the branches [of an old tree] are really thick, . . . you can lie on them, read, and listen to the birds.

Corresponsive Perception of Nature

This kind of perception connects nature that has been perceived or experienced with sense and meaning, as correspondences to one’s own life are constructed: “. . . then what nature is ‘talking’ about here, what takes shape in it, is something that moves human beings by nature: the outer appearance of the perspectives of their design, their idea of life. Only those with designs of this kind can experience nature as a positive or negative, as a surprising or frightening answer to the possibilities of one’s own existence” (ibid., p. 103). Landscapes, for example, can become lovely or dismal, animals can be loyal or hostile, nature can become the site of a successful life or it cannot, depending on the meanings ascribed.

“One can live uncontemplatively, but not uncorresponsively. Thus of all of our attitudes toward nature, the corresponsive attitude is the most obvious of our aesthetic attitudes” (ibid., p. 117). In our material, the corresponsive perception of nature is more likely to be found in anthropomorphic interpretations of nature. Nature is interpreted corresponsively as mirroring the human being and is thus understood anthropomorphically in a symbolic way. We have already demonstrated this in previous studies (e.g., Billmann-Mahecha et al., 1998), but not in connection with an aesthetics of nature. This will be illustrated by means of two examples. In the following example taken from a conversation among ten-year-olds, the analogizing correspondence is explicitly named in that is assumed that trees are “not so much different than we are.”

Marcus: I don’t think they’re so much different than us. I mean, we grow, and they grow, too.

Moritz: Except they get much older.

Marcus: Yeah, we have oak trees, they’re really nice, over a hundred years old.

Paul: Hmm, yeah. But they die, too, just like us.

Furthermore, our material also contains clues to a corresponsive way of perceiving nature in which nature and the human self-concept are metaphorically related to each other. An example:
Imaginative Perception of Nature

In this view, nature induces imagination and becomes an artistic occurrence. This kind of perception inspires one’s fantasy and gives rise to new images that make reference to existing images that have been generated culturally or personally. We found only a few indications of an imaginative perception of nature in our conversations with children. However, when—as in the excerpt cited above—the subject is the possibility that memories can also be associated with trees, that could be interpreted as an imaginative perception of nature: elsewhere in the conversation mentioned, Florian (11 years old) says: “. . . and for playing with and because there are so many good memories stuck to it.” That good memories are “stuck” to the tree could be interpreted as meaning that looking at the tree brings back memories of pleasant occurrences; it activates the episodical memory and on this basis (re)constructively allows new images to emerge.

An aesthetic attitude toward nature affects (unlike a scientific or technical-instrumental attitude) above all a person’s sense of self. In this way, the aesthetic perception of nature can become an element of a good life. As our examples demonstrate, this can also be experienced by children and expressed verbally. However, we conclude, based on children’s perspectives, that Seel’s concept of nature as part of sense of self has to be supplemented by another way of perceiving nature, that is, a direct-interactive manner. We will explain this in more detail later, in our first case study.

As the aesthetic perception of nature becomes a more or less essential element of a good life, the perception of the beauty of nature can also be attributed to a person’s need structure, that is, that a human being also has greater needs whose fulfillment he or she aspires to if vital needs have been met (Maslow, 1970). Another example from our conversations with children:

Laura (11 years old): I wanted to say that if all the trees and things get cut down and we only have yellow, if we only had sand, we would go crazy. If we didn’t see anything else the whole day, the whole day, no green, no blue, no pink, no orange, we’d go crazy. We’d flip out.

In these statements, moral reasons are given for the argument that the perception of the beauty of nature belongs to our basic human needs, including the conservation of nature:

Leonie (10 years old): Yes, and then people would be sorry that they did something so bad. That’s when the lights would suddenly go on that they did something wrong.

Atmosphere as a Core Concept of a New Aesthetics

Böhme’s aesthetics of nature focuses the sensuously perceptible “body” on perceiving environments: “Based on ecology, the question is raised concerning one’s location in environments, of atmospheres. An aesthetics of nature viewed in this way is then less the issue of philosophical debate, but it has a very practical meaning, namely in the arrangement of our nature environments founded in aesthetics as ‘part of an extended ecology’” (Böhme, 1989, p. 12 [trans. by the authors]). It could “play an important role in the redesign of the human’s relationship with nature. In the development of the consciousness of the senses, it would have the chance to school people in conscious bodily existence, to teach them what it means to be nature itself” (Böhme, 1992, p. 23).

The ecological aesthetics of nature is not primarily concerned with judgments, as is the case in traditional aesthetics, which almost exclusively focuses on the development of criteria for the judgment of works of art. “Compared with the traditional concept of sensuality as the assertion of information, full sensuality assimilates the affective, emotionality, and the imaginative. The primary subject of sensuality is not the thing one perceives, but what one feels: the atmospheres” (Böhme, 1995, p. 15).

In this respect, we do not experience nature (as such), but atmospheres. Schmitz (1969), who was the first to elaborate on atmosphere as a philosophical concept, stresses that atmospheres are always spatial and non-localizable powers of emotion or carriers of moods. Walter Benjamin (1936/2005) worked out the concept of the aura in a similar way. In this context, Böhme (1989) argued decisively for an altered ontology: the atmospheres, imagined as non-local, freely floating fluids into which humans are embedded, remain vague with respect to their ontological status. They are not only detached from people, but also from things.

Böhme deals with the uncertain status of the subject-object dichotomy, which excludes either the subject or the object from perception, by suggesting a new ecological approach to aesthetics. He radically reformulates thing ontology: for aesthetic perception, the classic subject-object dichotomy is to be overcome inasmuch as the atmospheric is to be regarded as a...
common reality for subject and object, as something to be situated between subject and object. In contrast, classic ontology identifies the thing as being what it is, which can then somehow have an aesthetic effect or be grasped subjectively. Thus as a rule, a thing is characterized irrespective of what it might be for others or whether this being-for-others perhaps even belongs to its essence. The thing is understood as something that is closed in itself.

Böhme (1989) points to an alternative to classic thing models. In this alternative model, stepping out of itself and revealing itself also belong to materiality. Against the background of this modified thing ontology, the concept of ecstasy (stepping out of oneself) is meaningful for a new aesthetics. A good example is the musical instrument: this “thing” has a nature or an essence (sound), which, however, it does not have of its own accord (i.e., when not played) and which is inaudible.

In our material, the atmospheric becomes evident in the sensuous perception of ecstasy. This becomes particularly clear when nature, above all plants, can be smelled, which causes them to effuse atmosphere. A real fir tree “then smells like the woods. That’s somehow more Christmassy” (Marcus, 10 years old).

Max (10 years old): And the big, I mean the real fir tree smells better too, then the apartment smells much better, because you unwrap your Christmas presents on Christmas Eve and you always have that smell; you can still smell it.

Anne (9 years old): They smell a lot different, the plants, and when you have such a musty house, and then, and then you get a couple of plants, and then that smells a little. And we have lots of them.

While smell evidently contributes to the ecstatic quality of natural objects, for us, the features of objects, which “show” themselves only when they are directly touched, are also responsible for the atmospheric. At least this is suggested in the following excerpt from a conversation:

Moritz (10 years old): We were at a shopping center yesterday, and there was a big fir tree there and it was artificial.

Interviewer: And did you like it?

Moritz: Well, it looked a little funny (laughs). The needles, they were so funny when you touched them.

Later in the conversation, Paul specified what was so funny about the needles of artificial trees:

Paul (10 years old): Hmm, they’re mostly—fir trees have pointy needles, and the fir trees I saw yesterday [the artificial ones], they’re so square, the needles. You notice that.

While pointed fir-tree needles require careful touching and encountering, artificial fir-tree needles are “square.” One notices their artificial quality, not just visually, as we interpret the children’s comments, but it also creates a different tactile atmosphere.

Aesthetic insight into nature has to take into account the perceptibility of nature. This communicative feature of nature, which Böhme develops, becomes evident in its ecstasies. This presumes that in addition to the organs of perception, there also have to be organs of showing oneself, of self-expression. By means of its immediacy—to some extent the obtrusiveness of the ecstasy—in the aesthetic perception of nature, the atmospheric may be closely connected with the moral dimension of the beauty of nature elaborated above. The following example may serve to illustrate this:

Stefan (11 years old): It would be better if more people respected nature, because these trees, they make everything really nice, and you can smell the trees, too. The fir trees and such, they smell so good sometimes, and that smells much better than exhaust fumes.

Böhme (1995) himself illustrates the atmospheric by means of special linguistic expressions, namely poems about nature, which the atmosphere has already been consolidated. In a certain way, atmosphere may indicate something highly indefinite, yet “we apparently have a wealthy vocabulary with which to characterize atmospheres, namely as cheerful, melancholy, dismal, uplifting, awe-inspiring, inviting, erotic, etc.” (ibid., p. 22). As the examples from our empirical material suggest, children are already capable of verbally expressing atmospheres.

**Results II: Case Studies**

**Case 1: “... because nature is really nice”**

The first case study clearly demonstrates how all of the positions with respect to the aesthetics of nature we have described can play a role in a child’s experience and judgment, if to varying degrees. In this case study, three third-grade girls and two third-grade boys between the ages of eight and nine discuss the question of whether a pond and the meadow around it should be dried up in order to build an adventure playground on the site (see Appendix). The children are decisively against drying up the pond and the meadow, above all
because of the animals that live there. However, the children universally cite aesthetic reasons of equal importance, first and foremost beauty.

Interviewer: It’s important to you because of the animals?

Tobi: Yes.

Sarah: Yes, the poor animals.

Tobi: And because of the nice, because of the plants.

Janin: And because nature is really nice.

In this passage, in which the interviewer summarizes the previous conversation in the form of a question, a new, added argument emerges—the beauty of the plants and nature. We infer from the context that this is in the ethically connoted form of the human-object relationship formulated by Neu-maier (see above): the children refer to nature as “nice” because they appreciate it solely due to its attributes. If only suggested, the aspect of aesthetization as the moralization of nature emerges here, initially in the simple sense that nature is worth conserving because it is beautiful. This becomes clearer in the following passage, in which the beauty of an adventure playground is compared with the beauty of nature.

Tobi: An adventure playground may be really nice, but na—, but, but I, but nature is, I think nature is much nicer. . . . I would ha—, I would have this meadow protected.

Sarah: Yes. So would I.

Nature is more beautiful, which is why it is worthy of being protected. A further aspect is added that brings the line of argument to a head, namely the transience of the beauty of an adventure playground. In view of what the children suspect are the animals’ interests, due to its anticipated ugliness, the playground does not have a chance:

Nina: The poor animals. Their habitat is taken away, just because of a playground that will anyway be beat up in two days.

Sarah: You mean it will look bad.

A beat-up playground looks ugly and is, as we can add, undesirable. Here, we discover—albeit in its negation—the first form of human-object relationship addressed by Neu-maier (we call something beautiful if there is something about the object that is desirable). Although an intact playground definitely has something attractive and desirable about it (“An adventure playground may be really nice . . .”), it is not permanent, as Janin explains:

Janin: Because I know a playground like that, but I don’t know anymore where it is. And it used to be really nice there. It was new, everything was new, and then my mother went there a couple of weeks later and then, then there was scribbling everywhere, and all the swings were pulled off, and the edges of the slides were broken . . . . I thought that was dumb, because you couldn’t do anything anymore.

Janin’s remark introduces another aspect into the conversation: one can no longer play on a beat-up playground. As the conversation proceeds, it becomes clear how important being able to do something, playing, is to the children besides their concern for the animals and the beauty of nature as such:

Max: An adventure playground, um, I don’t think it’s so good anyway, um, anyway, it looks better without a playground.

Janin: Yes, and besides, the really nice flowers and everything . . .

Nina: Yes.

Janin: . . . and, um, if it’s winter, then everything is covered with snow anyway, and then you can play very good anyway, and if there’s a meadow there and a pond and then, and then, um, there’s ice there and then you can ride a sled.

After the children reassure themselves that the area looks better without an adventure playground—and it no longer plays a role whether it is intact or beat up—Janin returns to the aspect of being able to do something. Nature offers the opportunity of doing something even if the playground cannot be used. Tobi now takes up this argument and supports it with a further example:

Tobi: And, um, can you even have a picnic at a playground? . . . And if there’s a play—, a little playground, then how can you have a picnic there, hum? When everything’s gone.

Janin: You can’t, because then it’s silly. . . . Besides, if you have a picnic on, on playground equipment, it doesn’t look very nice. But if you do that on a really beautiful meadow with tall grass and the sun is shining, then that’s much nicer and then maybe you can go swimming in the pond.

The children occupy themselves for some time with being able to do something in nature. A further example:

Janin: And besides, I think it’s good, here, um, if, um, there’s no lawn there, then you can’t, um, run around there a little for fun, um, throw yourself down
into, into, um, the meadow. But if you, if you have a big meadow, and they said the grass would be really tall, then you could jump into it, and you could decorate yourself with flowers and stuff.

Tobi: And build dens and stuff.

Janin: And if everything is gone, then it’s a drag, because then it looks, um, silly anyway someday.

Thus we can conclude from their remarks that the children are concerned about activities that would not be possible elsewhere: to slide on the frozen pond in the winter, to have a picnic on the tall grass and run and throw oneself into it in the summer. It becomes evident that these activities are pleasurable, non-instrumental encounters with nature, for whose sake nature—for all intents and purposes with an anthropocentric emphasis—is to be conserved. The importance children attach to actively encountering and playfully abandoning themselves to nature (throwing themselves into the grass) appears to legitimize interpreting nature from a child’s perspective as a source of life enrichment. However, Martin Seel’s concept of the aesthetics of nature as an opportunity to have a “good life” appears to us to need revision. The modes of encountering nature he differentiates among (contemplation as a mode of encountering nature that is devoid of meaning, correspondence as a mode of encountering nature that is meaningful, and imagination as a mode of encountering nature that is pictorial) have to be joined by another that is meaningful to children, namely direct physical interaction as a kinesthetic mode of encountering nature: one does something in and with nature that precisely due to this activity communicates physical pleasure and a comfortable feeling. In several short excerpts from the conversation, the children specify activities in nature that can easily be interpreted as physically pleasurable: riding a sled, having a picnic on the meadow, swimming in the pond, running around, throwing oneself or jumping into the tall grass, decorating oneself with flowers. Experiencing pleasure and a comfortable feeling in nature can be interpreted as consistent with Böhme’s ecological model. For him, it is precisely being in an environment that is an aesthetic issue; atmospheric experience is at the center of his concept. In our conversation, atmospheric experience is most clearly expressed by Janin: “But if you do that on a really beautiful meadow with tall grass and the sun is shining, then that’s much nicer . . .” The indirectly active activities mentioned in the children’s comments point toward an atmospheric experience. Nature (e.g., tall grass) has a stimulative quality, i.e., it emits “something” that stimulates children to be active, which in turn is experienced as pleasurable due to the quality of its proximity.

Overall, the passages cited clearly show the meaning aesthetics has for a child’s general perception of nature. Beauty as a classic core concept of aesthetics plays a particularly noticeable role; to some extent, the beauty attached to nature is linked with a moral attitude toward nature. However, we also find empirical evidence of Seel’s and Böhme’s recent concepts of an aesthetics of nature in the conversations with the children, above all if we consider a child’s physical-active experience of nature.

As far as the development of aesthetic judgment transferred to nature as an object of judgment is concerned, we are able to identify stages 1 and 2 (of Parsons’ model) principally. In stage 2, the children argue on the basis of their delight in colors and objects, and subjective preferences predominate. We also find this in our conversation with the children about nature. They in part simply deliberate about whether nature or the adventure playground is “much nicer” and decide in favor of nature. In stage 2, the children argue based on the idea of realism. We also find this in our conversations, though primarily in terms of the playground. They contend that there is no use for a damaged playground, but, in addition, what is important for the children is that if it is no longer functional or realistic, it looks “silly,” as they emphasized on several occasions.

Case 2: “If we had no flowers . . .”

In this conversation, the children—a total of five between the ages of eight and ten from a third-grade class—discussed the question of how important a real fir tree is as opposed to an artificial one (see Appendix).

The children debated the following questions: the question of authenticity, the question of the atmosphere envisaged by and associated with the fir tree, and, finally, the question of whether one should cut down so many fir trees because of the Christmas spirit. Beyond the dilemma in terms of an ethics of nature (the advantages and disadvantages of “real” and “fake” plants) induced by this discussion, several additional aspects emerged as themes in the conversation among the children, e.g., what trees feel, a comparison of trees with people, and aesthetic issues. The following excerpt is at the end of the conversation:

Kirsten: I think, I think more, that—we also need the flowers to survive; you decorate meadows with flowers, too.

Sophia: If we had no flowers, then . . . flowers are really beautiful things!

Kirsten: Flowers make people happy, too.
Several aesthetic arguments are used in this short passage. When Kirsten thinks about “needing the flowers,” she cites utilitarian arguments; however they are all related to aesthetics. Thus we do not “need” flowers primarily for any biological-ecological reasons (for instance, for the production of oxygen, which, by the way, was an argument the children frequently cited in our conversations about nature), but because one can also decorate meadows with them. Thus the children assert, consistent with Maslow (1970), that people also have needs greater than survival, for example, the perception of the beauty of nature. The children explicitly emphasize the aesthetic perception of flowers: flowers are beautiful, smell nice, and make one happy. They serve no other purpose.

As an aesthetic aspect, “decorating,” is implicitly related to the desire to preserve the flowers. Thus, the moral connotation of the aesthetics of nature can—without this having to be explicitly expressed in an ethical line of argument—lead to the conservation of nature, less for the sake of its own beauty and more for people’s aesthetic needs. In this conversation, the children make arguments in terms of an aesthetics of nature from an anthropocentric perspective; here, the beauty of nature is not a value in itself that is valid without the consideration of human needs.

Thus, when moralizing nature in this way, backing it up with aesthetics, nature is interpreted as something worthy of conservation. People need flowers: for one thing, “to survive,” and for another thing, due to their aesthetic attributes. Both Kirsten’s (“that—we also need the flowers”) and Sophia’s (“If we had no flowers”) ideas address the danger that flowers may one day no longer exist. The added “then” in Sophia’s statement, which she did not go on to explain, might point to an underlying, unspoken threat that would lie in the loss of flowers. The threat to nature is actually being addressed indirectly, as the context of the conversation shows. The threat also exists in the loss of the opportunity for aesthetic sentiment in viewing beautiful flowers. Thus the classic concept of beauty is by all means important in the children’s arguments. Sophia adds that “flowers are really beautiful things!”

KirstenAugments the argument with reference to Martin Seel’s life enhancement: “Flowers make people happy, too.” According to Seel, beautiful flowers are namely an element of a good life, and it is therefore ethically necessary to preserve them, in a manner of speaking, as an aesthetic resource. According to Seel, nature is worthy of conserving or protecting because beautiful nature is a space for free and non-instrumental human lifestyles. Thus an ethics of a good life demands the possibility of experiencing the beauty of nature. This argument in terms of an ethics of nature that is bound to aesthetics places people at the center of a moralization: nature is worth preserving for the sake of people leading good lives, and not for its own sake.

By developing the aesthetics of nature as a possibility for leading a good life, Seel not only examines aesthetic value judgments, but real life aspects of a good life that is enhanced by the experience of nature. There is a variety of evidence in our material for what we understand to be an emphasis on the aesthetics of nature in the sense of life enhancement (see above).

In conclusion, we address the ecstatic element, as described by Böhme (1989): because flowers “smell really nice” (Ayla), in a manner of speaking they step outside themselves, creating “atmosphere” for the children. Smelling as a means of expressing the atmospheric becomes apparent elsewhere in this conversation, namely when the controversy emerges whether and for what reason one needs a real fir tree.

Kirsten: For example, first of all, a plastic fir tree is made of plastic, and secondly, it doesn’t really look real; thirdly, it doesn’t really smell like nature.

Sophia: Because it doesn’t smell like nature and because it’s so . . . plastic, so the fir trees are made of plastic. Real ones smell like nature . . . .

Meike: And a plastic fir tree doesn’t so look very nice either.

Kirsten later adds: “What I wanted to say: the real fir tree, if you look at it close, then you see that it’s real and that’s really nice.” The atmosphere, and thus the aesthetic aura of the natural fir tree, is associated with its authenticity. A technically manufactured, artificial fir tree can no longer, quite in line with Walter Benjamin’s (2005) concept of aura, effuse atmosphere.

Discussion

Theoretical Remarks

First, analysis of the group discussions showed that children as young as about eight years of age articulate the aesthetic quality of their perception of nature of their own accord. This is all the more remarkable, as in the dilemmas discussed with the children the aesthetic dimension was not explicitly addressed. Secondly, our analysis demonstrated that the children’s statements can be interpreted with reference to central stances on the aesthetics of nature, or, formulated in another way, that these stances can serve as categories of
interpretation for children’s statements with aesthetic content. This applies both to beauty as a classic core concept of aesthetics as well as to the moralization of nature by aestheticizing it (Kant, 2008), for nature as life-enriching (Seel, 1991), and for the concept of nature as atmosphere (Böhme, 1995).

Moreover, our conversations with the children also suggested an extension of concepts in terms of the aesthetics of nature, in particular the concept of nature as life-enriching. Besides the three modes of encountering nature described by Seel (1991), namely contemplation, correspondence, and imagination, on the basis of our empirical material we suggest also adding direct physical interaction as a mode of the kinesthetic encounter with nature. To us, this especially appears to be life-enriching from a child’s perspective.

**Developmental Psychological Tendencies**

In examining the formation of aesthetic judgment about nature, we were able to identify structures consistent with stages 1 and 2 of the formation of aesthetic judgment postulated by Parsons (1987). However, whether this is due to the selected age groups or to his formulation of stages, which make reference to visual art and not nature, must remain open. It seems to be worthwhile for future studies to more extensively examine the development of children’s statements about the aesthetics of nature.

The main result of our investigation is confirmation that aesthetic judgments and feelings play a role in a child’s relationship with nature. That is not a trivial conclusion, since many investigations emphasize the pragmatic and experience-related value of the experience of nature. Thus, children either do not have an adult-like, introspective, scenery-focused aesthetics of nature, or it seldom appears. We were able to confirm this through our analyses of children’s conversations. Moreover, using our extended concept of aesthetics, the sensual-aesthetic aspects of a child’s approach to nature became apparent. This applies to the emphasis on beauty as a quasi-classic concept of aesthetics as well as, to a greater degree, other, more aesthetic approaches: the perception and designation of the atmospheric in nature, corresponsive and contemplative approaches, and finally, the perception and interpretation of nature as life-enriching. The developmental perspective comes to light when the conversations are viewed as a whole. Here it becomes clear that experiences of nature have a development-accelerating function. We were able to show in a previous study (Gebhard et al., 2003) that nature experiences are related to the development of identity. This also applies to the aesthetic dimension, where children make the connection between relation to nature and relation to self. The corresponsive relationship with nature interpreted as aesthetic, pleasurable and conscious experience also reinforces one’s relationship to oneself and is therefore an element of the development of identity.

What continues to be of interest for understanding the development of the aesthetics of nature are possible age changes in individual aesthetic approaches to nature. In this study, age changes could not be addressed, due to small sample size and lack of longitudinal data. However, our study did indicate some intriguing trends related to age group differences. In the youngest age group (seven to nine years old), the “nature as life-enriching” theme dominates. There are not yet any atmospheric and contemplative aspects of the aesthetic perception of nature. Moreover, there is also the corresponsive perception of nature, with the idea of identification with nature.

In the age group of 10-13 years old, the “nature as life-enriching” theme persists, as does the corresponsive perception of nature, if in a more reflective form. The correspondence between self and nature is no longer stated as fact, but is rather described with linguistic symbols. Here, the similarity to the Seelian aesthetic concept is already evident. The concept of the beauty of nature emerges here for the first time.

This trend continues in the oldest age group (fourteen to eighteen years old). The ways in which they experienced nature at younger ages continue, to which is added the meaning of the atmospheric and an even more explicit reference to the concept of “beauty.” What is most conspicuous in this age group is the stronger degree of reflection. While in the 10-13 age group the connection between an aesthetics of nature and environmental protection is only implicit, the adolescents argued for this connection in an explicit and reflective way.

Although these results are based on extensive group discussion material, the findings are limited by the study conditions. These limitations include that the participants come exclusively from urban areas. Both cities are in northern Germany and have relatively large areas of green space. Thus, we cannot determine the influence of differences in living environments (for example, rural versus urban) on the subjective significance of the aesthetic perception of nature. However, the primary focus on this study was to clarify more precisely the meaning of aesthetics in a child’s relationship with nature. Further investigations, including longitudinal studies, would be desirable for a developmental psychological perspective.
Conclusion

As our findings have shown, there is an affinity between aesthetic value judgments or aesthetic perceptions with respect to nature and anthropomorphistic interpretations of nature. Both types of thought have something to do with one’s self, and both approaches to nature take place at a symbolic level.

Symbols of nature for the interpretation of human beings or one’s self are frequently used in literary testimonies and reports on the experience of nature. Nature acts, so to speak, as a reservoir of symbols for a person’s interpretation of him- or herself. One can be as deeply rooted as a tree or as gentle as a lamb. The burgeoning vegetation in spring can become a beacon of hope, or we can feel like a fish in water. Unlike anthropomorphic interpretations, these kinds of symbolization can be called “physiomorphic” interpretations. By means of the circle of interpretational patterns—objects in processes can be called “physiomorphic” interpretations. By means of the circle of interpretational patterns—objects in nature that have been interpreted anthropomorphically are redirected toward the subject through physiomorphic patterns of interpretation (cf. Keil, 1993)—the objects in nature that have been charged with meaning can become personal aspects. Emotional object representations do not contain only a faithful reflection of the outer world; they also have symbolic meaning, in which the relationship to the objects is central. In this way, they also influence one’s own self. The non-human environment, nature, is thus never only an outer phenomenon, but always a system of symbols charged with (subjective) meaning that has an aesthetic component.

The meanings natural phenomena have symbolically—and this also includes aesthetic judgments—are not features of natural phenomena, but rather the creations of human beings. It is precisely for this reason that an (aesthetic) experience of nature can at the same time be self-awareness. Symbols of nature can be used to describe and understand one’s self. However, this is not a homology, which would imply a structural affinity, but rather an analogy that more or less uses nature as a symbolic mirror. Thus the outer world or nature functions as reason for symbolization, which makes a person’s self-awareness possible. The symbols with which we seek to interpret and understand ourselves are drawn from the world we encounter; the world in which we live determines our self-awareness.

Thus there is a correspondence between the state of outer nature and the state of inner nature. In this respect, multifaceted and intact outer nature, which is perceived as beautiful or aesthetic, will have a positive impact on one’s emotional disposition or health. In addition, one should keep in mind that the relationship to (outer) nature is a dialectical one: in the same way outer nature is reflected in one’s emotions, so shall the state of outer nature also be interpreted as a reflection of a person’s inner emotional constitution. The state of nature is not a natural phenomenon, but should be related to the situation of the modern human being.

References

nature in the age of its technical reproducibility]. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.


**The Fir Tree**

As every year, Ole and Kerstin anticipate their father coming home from buying a Christmas tree. For the last several years, the day before Christmas Eve they help to decorate the tree. The big box with the bulbs, angels, and candleholders that was stored in the basement all year is already in the living room, where new tinsel and red candles have already been laid out. Ole voices his concern: “Hopefully the fir tree won’t be as prickly as last year’s.” Kerstin adds: “It’s still better than the tree that lost all its needles after only three days.” They finally hear their father opening the front door. Both run to meet him and hold the door open. “It’s an especially beautiful tree this year,” Father explains, as he does every year when he comes in. “You’ve never seen one like this before!” But instead of a tall, green fir tree, he’s holding a cardboard box. “Plastic Christmas Tree with Attachable Branches—Reusable—Environmentally Friendly” it says on the box. “How do you like it?” Father asks, amused. “But that’s not a real fir tree; it doesn’t smell like anything!” Kerstin exclaims, disgusted. “A fir tree is a fir tree,” says Ole, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. It looks completely real, and it doesn’t lose its needles.”

What do you think?

**The Tree House**

Peter and Sarah are planning to build a tree house. It’s supposed to be a particularly fine one, in which several children can sleep and eat and read comics. Each child is to have his or her own corner in the tree house for storing candy and other private things. The tree they’ve chosen for their building project is a lovely old willow with big, roomy branches on an empty lot not far away. It’s really the only tree around that’s suitable for their purposes. The others in the surroundings are in private yards or parks. Besides, they’re all too small. Flushed with excitement, Sarah describes her plan: “First we have to blaze a proper trail to the tree by chopping away all those brambles. Then we’ll cover it with flat stones. Of course, we have to clear the space beneath the tree as well. Otherwise we can’t find things if they fall out of the tree house. We’ll fasten a ladder to the trunk and saw off those two branches that are in the way so that we won’t have any trouble climbing in and out. Then we’ll nail boards between the branches to serve as railings and put in some kind of floors here and there. We might have to remove some more branches if we need more light in some places.” While listening to his friend Sa-
rah, Peter’s expression becomes more and more serious. He’s known the empty lot and the willow all his life and is familiar with every inch of them since he often goes there just to be by himself. He knows exactly where different birds nest in the tree and surrounding brambles and can name all the plants surrounding the tree. He finds the willow particularly beautiful just the way it is and replies to Sarah: “I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want a tree house after all, and I don’t want other kids to build one either. I don’t want to change the tree in any way at all. I think we should just leave nature in peace.” Sarah is annoyed. She can’t understand Peter’s lack of enthusiasm and replies in a huff: “I don’t agree at all. First of all, we’re not talking about nature but about a messy old abandoned lot. I’ve never seen the owner, and he certainly doesn’t care what we do to the tree. The tree itself can’t care one way or the other. Besides, children have a right to play, and that’s the most important thing.”

What do you think?

The Adventure Playground

Carsten and Florian live on the outskirts of town. One afternoon, Carsten approaches Florian and is upset. “Florian, imagine this! The pond and the meadow around it are going to be drained! “Why?” asks Florian, looking blank. “They’re going to build an adventure playground.” “Hey, Carsten, that’s great,” says Florian, pleased. “Then we’ll finally have the playground we need so bad. We get sent away everywhere we go.” Carsten counters: “Yeah, but the meadow around the pond is a good place to play on, too.” “Yeah, it is, but the ball always falls into the pond! And anyway, the grass and the flowers are much too tall to play soccer. If the pond was drained then we’d have much more space. And an adventure playground is much more exciting, too,” replies Florian, who does not understand why his friend Carsten is so against a playground being built. “And what about the green plants, the trees, the bushes, the blackberry hedge, and the plants growing in the pond?” Carsten argues. “Should they all be pulled out just so we have a playground?” “What do you mean? After all, we need a playground,” Florian counters. Carsten interrupts him: “But the plants and the animals have a right to be there.” Florian answers back: “But we have a right to have a playground. And I don’t want to do without one.”

What do you think?

Hornet’s Lives

Maren and Kai are having breakfast on the patio in the sun. A fat hornet suddenly buzzes by Maren, and she shouts, “Kai, a hornet! Watch out! Go get the fly swatter!” Kai calmly sips away at his hot chocolate. “I don’t care for fly swatters,” he says, resolved. “Hornets are useful animals. They eat other insects. You’re not allowed to kill them. Besides, they’re endangered. There aren’t all too many hornets left anymore.” “No,” cries Maren. “That’s going too far! Hornets are dangerous. Did you know that a hornet sting can be fatal? I saw where that creature disappeared, and I’m going to call the exterminator right now!” “If they weren’t so rare, I’d be inclined to agree with you,” Kai says. “I’m afraid of them too, although my biology teacher told us that they’re not as dangerous as you think.” “Let somebody else protect then,” replies Maren. “I have the say-so in our garden, and I don’t want any hornets. Next thing you know you’ll probably want to protect even the mosquitoes and the spiders. Soon the ground will be covered with creepy-crawlies! “Listen,” Kai responds. “I want a garden that’s as natural as possible, and that includes hornets.”

What do you think?

1 Note on the translation: In this study, we drew on statements by children in which they emphatically refer to natural phenomena as “schön.” In order to highlight the emphasis, “schön” was translated as “really nice” or “really beautiful.”

2 Welsch (1997) has submitted an extensive analysis of the concept of aesthetics. According to him, there are different meanings for “aesthetics” and “aesthetic,” which among one another possess a “family likeness” in terms of Wittgenstein. Like the characteristic traits of a family, the elements of the semantic family are “aesthetically” distributed among the “family members” in different ways. Welsch discusses fourteen semantic elements, which each play a different role depending on the application of the concept of aesthetics.

3 James M. Baldwin (1926) submitted an early model that was also oriented toward cognitive development but not empirically substantiated.

4 The data stem from the project “Werthaltungen und Deutungsmuster von Kindern und Jugendlichen angesichts naturethischer Dilemmata” (Value Systems and Patterns of Interpretation among Children and Adolescents in Light of Dilemmas in Terms of the Aesthetics of Nature) carried out in collaboration with Patricia Nevers and funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).