Nature Connections

New Pathways to Sustain and Shape Community Practice

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relevant literature, key findings pertinent to community development practice are examined:

- Nature connection practices strengthen ecological identity and spiritual connectedness;
- The significance of *place* and cultural context in personal and professional practice;
- Connection to nature sustains practitioners both personally and in their wider social/community practice.

In these times of ecological crisis and manic grind culture, as a response, the article argues for the inclusion of nature connections in a practitioner's framework of practice. Based on participant responses and theorising, we have developed a tentative new framework for implicate level practice – *Connection to Place* (see Figure 2).

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to share new thinking that emerged from community development action research conducted in 2025. Grounded in nature connection literature and a four-month action research process, the article examines the relationship between nature connection (NC) and community development (CD). It argues that nature connection, as a practice and philosophy, can open new pathways to sustain and shape community development practice, particularly at the implicate level (see below).

Drawing on Indigenous epistemologies, nature connection practices supported participants in their community practice through deeper incorporation of *place* and as a way of resisting the manic productivity grind culture that often shapes professional life (Donovan and Westoby, 2024; Han, 2015). *Place* is a critical influence in shaping practitioner wellbeing and the implicate level of their collective community practice.

According to Kelly and Westoby (2018), the implicate level or method of community development refers to how practitioners show up for their work. It is about our 'being' – "*who we are, what we want, what we bring, and what we give to the work*" (2018:29). Its ultimate expression is a personal framework of practice, unique to each practitioner, and is comprised of personal and professional values, practice principles and theory. Such a practice framework represents a practitioner's best efforts to explicitly name the important connections between their inner world and the outer world in which they work. A framework of practice is a guide for practice based on their values and worldviews, which in turn informs decisions they make about their community level practice. Typically, it is comprised of a small number of dimensions and elements naming key ideas that can easily be remembered in the cut and thrust of practice.

The research involved fourteen female community work practitioners and volunteers who attended four day-long nature-connection processes over four months during 2025. Stories and personal reflections were collected through pre-workshops and a post-workshops survey; two focus groups; contributions to a closed Facebook group responding to provocations posed between workshops; and observations and reflections made by the two researchers of designed activities. The article outlines background factors and motivations underpinning the research; drawing on

Motivation for the Research

Nature connections as a practice and philosophy – that is a way of both doing and being - has become increasingly important and relevant in the professional and personal lives of both researchers. The project was born from this growing importance, along with a shared desire to understand the impact of connecting with nature in community practitioners' lives and work.

During the last few years, first author Rachael has been part of a nature connections community which explores ancient earth-based skills and philosophies as a method of cultural revitalisation and change[1]. After decades of working in the development and social change sector and feeling a sense of burnout from this work, she felt that a deeper sense of individual and collective relationship with nature was a missing link to bring any type of change work to deeper fruition. For her, nature connections are about re-establishing a deeper sense of ecological belonging through connection to ancestral ways of being. This sense of belonging helps humans re-establish a rightful and true place in the Earth community based on interdependence, reciprocity and holism. She felt aligned to Indigenous ecological understandings which emphasise that human flourishing emerges from reciprocal and participatory relationships with the more-than-human world. Cajete (1994), Deloria Jr. (2003/1973), Kimmerer (2013) and Simpson (2017) argue that all human societies once held relational, land-based epistemologies in which belonging, interdependence and stewardship were not ideals but lived realities. It was this revitalisation she was passionate about cultivating in her own life and alongside others.

In 2024, Rachael was strongly called to Quest - a 4-day/night solo wilderness vigil, fasting from all things familiar and comfortable. Vision Quests is an ancient wilderness rite of passage designed to enable direct and unfiltered contact with nature's wisdom in order to deeply understand our individual purpose in life. Contemporary wilderness rites-of-passage practitioners (Foster & Little, 1998; Plotkin, 2003) describe Vision Quests as structured solitary encounters with the more-than-human world designed to

facilitate clarity of purpose, psychological integration and ecological self-understanding. Transpersonal psychology further suggests that extended periods of solitude in nature opens pathways to deep insight, purpose and archetypal meaning (Grof, 1988; Maslow, 1964), giving theoretical grounding to the transformative effects of Quest traditions. This was the case for Rachael, as her experience of Vision Quest was transformative and life-changing, allowing her to experience her own interconnection to the natural world and her role in it in profound new ways.

Tina, the second author, had been acutely aware of the current tipping point for climate justice. She had been thinking deeply about environmental justice issues and rather than feel overwhelmed by the climate crisis and the future of living things, she was keen to develop a sense of agency to affect change in some positive way. She drew on the philosophy of First Nations scholar Mary Graham, who argues that for a good society we would all benefit from adopting what is known in Australian Aboriginal culture as a *custodial ethic* (Lathouras, 2020). This ethic has a relationalist ethos that centres on the connection between people and the land and importantly, *action* associated with caring for both. With a desire to collaborate with others, Tina joined a local Bushcare group at Russell Family Park in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland, Queensland. This group is reforesting seven-hectares of land with rainforest species indigenous to the Blackall Range and have planted over 8,500 native species to date. The park is the site for regular community tree planting events restoring natural habitats and is also a beautiful public space for visitors and locals to commune with nature.

As an educator of community development with social work students, Tina was also aware that the profession and practice of social work places a great deal of emphasis on the pursuit of social justice and supporting people's psychological well-being. However, in this epoch where climate change is causing a range of environmental crises, Dominelli (2014) argues that the "*social*" and the "*ecological*" are inextricably linked. The impacts of climate change, including forced migration and increasing numbers of displaced persons, will increase inequity issues for people with less social, political and economic advantage. This puts them at greater risk of the associated effects from resource shortages, pollution and severe weather events. Social work and community development workers are currently at the front line of climate related responses including trauma associated with bushfires, drought and floods (and associated homelessness and food relief). Therefore, Tina's desire to work with Rachael as a co-researcher on this project also was about learning how to support practitioners to develop knowledge and skills to prepare them to respond to current and impending ecological changes.

Finally, when designing the research, an important decision was made to hold the four workshops at Nungeena Aboriginal Corporation for Women's Business on the Sunshine Coast. This First Nations-led community organisation is located at the base of Mount Beerwah - one of the Glasshouse Mountains registered on the Queensland and National Heritage Register as a landscape of national significance. Mount Beerwah, with its craggy peak at a height of 556 metres, is known locally as "Mother Mountain" and a sacred women's space for First Nation's people in the area. Drawing on Indigenous land-based epistemologies described earlier, Rachael and Tina hoped that this special location would be a source of inspiration and connection and assist participants to connect to the cultural and spiritual meaning of this place.

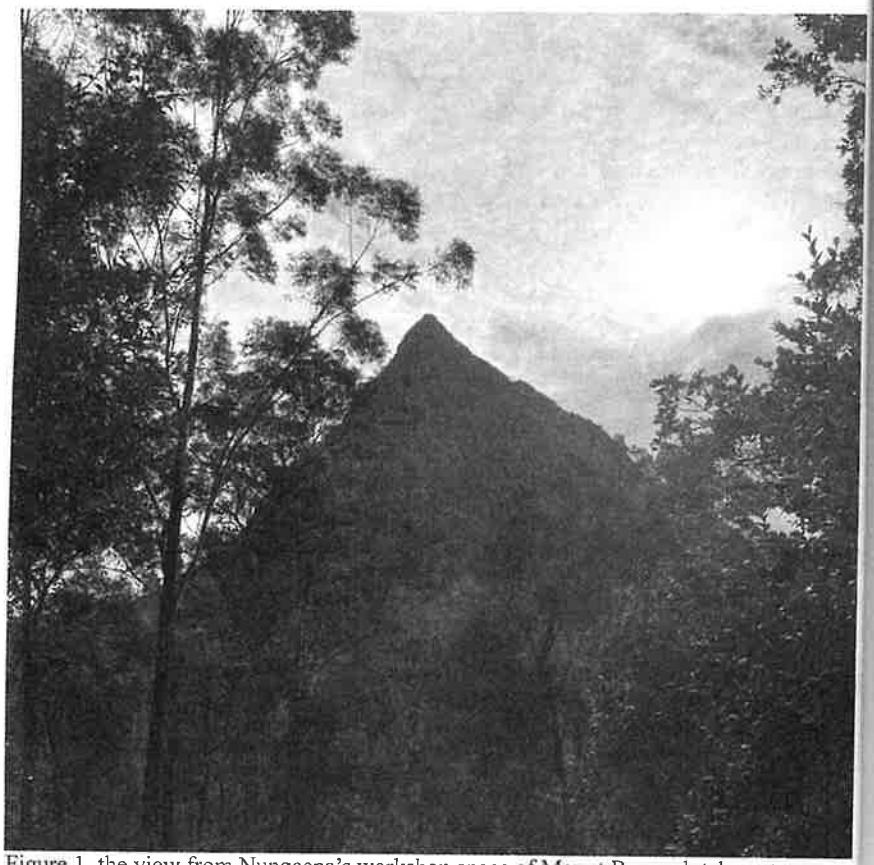

Figure 1, the view from Nungeena's workshop space of Mount Beerwah taken at Workshop #1.

Grounding the project in relevant literatures

One of the most significant sustainability challenges of our time, argues Muhr (2020), is the growing disconnect between modern societies and the natural world. Across multiple disciplines, the importance of re-establishing human–nature relationships have been well documented, including therapeutic benefits, enhanced wellbeing and increased pro-environmental behaviours (Zelenski, Dopko, & Capaldi, 2015; Bratman, Daily, Levy, & Gross, 2015). In an era marked by ecological and social crises, re-establishing meaningful human–nature connections are not simply desirable, but imperative for the future of both people and planet as well as community development practice.

The quality and depth of our relationship with nature shapes not only how we experience ourselves within it, but how we respond to it, both personally and in our professional practice. Zaph (2010), for example, critiques the long-standing "*person-in-environment*" metaphor within social work. While this framing has been valuable in integrating multiple levels of social practice such as casework, groupwork, family work, organisational and community practice — the profession has tended to interpret "environment" narrowly, privileging social contexts while marginalising ecological realities. This narrowing constrains practitioners' capacity to engage with environmental crises and limits a deeper understanding of and relationship to place in professional contexts. However, as human and environmental welfare are inextricably linked, there is now strong call for "*Green Social Work*" (or sometimes called "*Eco-Social Work*") to move from the margins to the mainstream. Expanding the definition of 'community' beyond the human to the ecological world will enable practitioners to develop stronger analyses of and ability to respond to the links between social and ecological issues.

In this regard, Zaph (2010) proposes a shift from a "*person-in-environment*" stance to a "*people-as-place*" orientation. This reframing moves beyond situating humans within an external environment and instead understands people as constituted through place. Ecological thinking, in this sense, is not an endpoint but an ongoing process of learning to live well within the ecological and cultural systems that sustain us. This perspective resonates with Ward's (2011) articulation of *bioregionalism* — a philosophy and practice grounded in intimate knowledge of local ecosystems, histories and cycles – that is developing *place literacies*. It also aligns with decolonial perspectives, including Indigenous scholarship such as Mary Graham's work, which emphasises a relational ontology and the inseparability of people, land and law (Lathouras, 2020).

Similarly, author Sharon Blackie (2018), drawing on decades of research across psychology and neuroscience, argues that place is not a neutral backdrop to human life but an active, shaping force. She makes the case that landscapes are not passive settings but participate in identity formation. In this way, different ecologies evoke, reflect and cultivate distinct aspects of selfhood. In this view, place is pedagogical — it teaches. However, contemporary debates within ecopsychology suggest that dominant measurement paradigms may insufficiently capture these relational and experiential dimensions of human–nature relationships. For example, Berrett (2025) argues that prevailing definitions privilege individual affective states (such as therapeutic or well-being benefits) over these relational or place-based orientations. He instead argues that regular connection to *particular places* have the capacity to be *self-expanding* in the way in which people may come to see and understand themselves.

From a community development perspective, these insights carry significant implications, particularly in relation to implicate practice - that is how practitioners show up in their work and the key influences that shape their practice (Kelly and Westoby, 2018). While place-based approaches in the field have gained traction, they often prioritise social, cultural and economic dimensions of locality. Expanding the concept of place to explicitly include ecological presence and reciprocal relationship invites a deeper transformation of both implicate practice and outer work in community. It raises questions not only about how practitioners work, but how they attend to, learn from and are shaped by *place* in the process of their work.

And yet, as Donovan (2025) argues, learning from and connecting to place requires slowness, attentiveness and embodied presence - capacities that are often constrained in contemporary practice contexts. Donovan and Westoby (2024) describe how managerialism, audit cultures, neoliberal funding regimes, technological intensification and 24/7 productivity expectations generate burnout, manic urgency and nervous system dysregulation among practitioners. Such conditions foster disembodiment and disconnection from place and from self, undermining both practitioner wellbeing and capacity for social change work. This aligns with Han's (2015) critique of the "*achievement society*," where the internalisation of productivity imperatives creates chronic exhaustion and burnout and where cultivating slowness, attentiveness and embodied presence is a form of resistance to compulsive work culture. In this context, nature connections practices may function as a counter-practice, particularly in implicate level work. As Donovan and Westoby (2024:102) suggest:

By encountering nature, we posit that through conscious practices of observing nature and natural processes, we can begin to shift and develop new ways of seeing that are more aligned with living processes, complexity and change, which can be applied to our social change work. Practices that invite a way of being in relationship with nature that is connected and intimate, can be applied in our inner lives/ implicate level of reflection.

Thus, while ecological and place-based frameworks call practitioners toward deeper relationality and grounded presence, dominant organisational cultures pull toward acceleration, abstraction and performativity. A *people-as-place* orientation, therefore, demands not only conceptual reframing but structural and embodied shifts in how practice is organised and lived. Without attending to the conditions that shape practitioners' capacity for presence, aspirations to integrate place into practice will remain constrained.

Against this backdrop, our research sought to extend existing research in nature connections and green social work by examining how nature connection practices support community practitioners in sustaining themselves, deepening their incorporation of place and resisting the pressures of manic grind culture (Han, 2015).

Research Design

The aim of this research was to understand if connecting to nature supports community workers to sustain themselves and deepen their professional practice. To do this, we explored if nature connection processes:

- a. Supports practitioners' relationship with nature;
- b. Contributes to sustaining the natural world;

- c. Supports practitioners' personal wellbeing;
- d. Supports practitioners' work practices;
- e. And the interconnection between these realms.

Methods

The project used a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative tools to capture participants' experiences before, during and after a series of community workshops. The approach emphasised participation, reflection and creative expression as central to the process and the knowledge generated.

Surveys

Two online surveys were developed and administered through Qualtrics. The pre-workshop survey, distributed before Workshop 1, established a baseline understanding of participants' expectations, experiences and perspectives. The post-workshop survey, sent one week after Workshop 3, sought to identify changes in learning, attitudes and practice. Both surveys included a mix of Likert-scale questions and open-ended responses to allow for both quantitative measurement and qualitative reflection.

Focus Groups

Two focus group discussions were used to deepen understanding of participants' experiences. A face-to-face group was held at the end of Workshop 3, providing space for dialogue and collective sense-making. Two one-hour online group sessions were conducted one month and five months after Workshop 4, which invited participants to revisit their experiences and reflect on any lasting impacts or changes in perspective.

Researcher Reflections

After each workshop, Rachael and Tina conducted debrief sessions documenting observations, group dynamics and emerging insights. These notes served two key purposes:

- To contribute to the critical reflection process regarding facilitation, workshop process and participant engagement; and
- To provide personal and contextual understanding that enriched data interpretation.

The reflections thus formed part of the qualitative dataset, supporting triangulation and ensuring reflexivity in the research process.

Data Analysis

Survey data were summarised using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and shifts over time. Qualitative data from open-ended survey questions, focus group transcripts, narratives from the closed Facebook group and researcher journals were reviewed and thematically analysed, with attention to recurring ideas, language and images that revealed participants' processes of connection, reflection and transformation.

Ethical Considerations

Human Ethics approval was granted by the University of the Sunshine Coast and all participants provided informed consent prior to taking part in the study. Participation was voluntary and individuals could withdraw at any stage without consequence. To ensure confidentiality, identifiable information was removed from all datasets and the closed Facebook group was moderated to maintain a safe and respectful environment. Participants retained ownership of the photographs, artworks and creative works they shared and explicit permission was obtained for any material included in research outputs.

Participants

A small cohort of 14 female participants took part in the project. Only females were recruited because of the workshop being held at Nungeena Aboriginal Corporation for Women's Business at the Glass House Mountains, Sunshine Coast. Given the workshop-based design, all participants were required to reside in South-East Queensland or be able to travel to attend the in-person sessions. All were adults aged over 18 years with ages ranging from the mid-30s to late-60s (mean age approximately 50 years). The cohort was predominantly non-Indigenous (93%) with one participant identifying as Indigenous.

The group represented a diversity of community practice experience, ranging from family support and mental health work to community arts, education, social work and community development. While demographically small, processes allowed a depth of engagement, relational learning and shared reflection, which are key principles consistent with participatory methodologies.

Research Activities

The project involved a series of integrated participatory and reflective activities designed to explore the relationship between nature connection and community practice. Two one-hour online project information sessions were held before the start of the three core workshops and a separate session before the fourth advanced practice workshop. These sessions introduced potential participants to the aims and structure of the project, the venue and described the four workshops, outlining key concepts related to nature connection and the potential benefits of participation. Attendees were encouraged to ask questions about the workshops and research process. Those wishing to participate received a QR code link to the pre-workshop survey via Qualtrics. The session was recorded for those who could not attend in person.

The following research processes were undertaken:

1. Workshop Series (Workshops 1–3)

Participants attended three six-hour in-person workshops, held approximately three weeks apart in winter 2025. While attendance at all three workshops was encouraged, participation was voluntary. Each workshop explored nature connections through experiential learning, reflective practice and creative expression to deepen participants' connection with nature and themselves.

Workshop 1 – May 2025 11 participants	creating the container – safe and brave spaces, group agreements and intention setting sit spots (earth-based meditation) plant observational practice reflective journalling individual and collective poetry making
Workshop 2 - June 2025 13 participants	collective singing based on poetry from session 1 sit spots silent sensory walks using alternative modes of perception smoking ceremony with a Traditional Owner (TO) story-sharing and group reflection nature journaling
Workshop 3 – June 2025 7 participants	storytelling and cultural knowledge sharing with a TO sit spots nature journaling silent walks and shared reflection circles

2. Advanced Practice Process (Workshop 4, September 2025)

Approximately two months after Workshop 3, eight participants self-selected to attend a seven-hour advanced process ('Soul Quest') designed to consolidate and deepen their nature connection practices. Workshop 4 offered an immersive *solo day in nature*, inspired by wilderness rites of passage used in many traditional cultures. Participants were invited to set an intention or come with a personal question about which they were seeking clarity. After an opening circle to share personal intentions, participants spent 5.5 hours alone and in silence in a small private natural area, where they were invited to observe their inner state/s and the natural world around them. The day concluded with a sharing circle to integrate insights and reflections from the experience.

3. Online Community Space

Throughout the project, a closed Facebook group served as a digital space for ongoing sharing and reflection. Rachael and Tina posted prompts, invitations and questions on various nature connection practices to encourage participation and connection between sessions. This space functioned as a repository of collective creativity and dialogue, strengthening the sense of community, learning, sharing and continuity between workshops.

Findings

Although a number of findings were revealed through the research, three are foregrounded here:

Strengthened ecological identity and spiritual connectedness

Two quantitative survey questions directly relate to this finding:

Q1. "*I see myself as part of the natural world, not separate from it*", and

Q2. "*I feel connected to something bigger than myself when in natural places*".

For Q1, the mean score increased from 7.97/10 pre-workshop to 9.08/10 post-workshop (+1.11). For Q2, the mean increased from 8.77/10 to 9.50/10 (+0.73). Although participants began with relatively high levels of nature connectedness, these shifts indicate a measurable strengthening in their identification with and belonging to the natural world.

The quantitative data were reinforced by qualitative shifts in language across the focus groups. Over the four-month period of the research, participants moved from describing nature as something external (yet still important) to them, to speaking in relational and kinship-based terms. We interpret this as evidence of a strengthened ecological identity, based on a sense of interconnection with the natural world and an expanded spiritual connection beyond the physical level. For example, two participants explicitly used the language of "*kin*" to describe their relationship with the natural world. One shared:

[the processes have given me] the sense of wanting to share with others the importance of the natural world, our kinship with it. It's been a great support in my life, through some difficult times...and in the future it may inform how I work with people as well.

Another participant described how the Quest experience both affirmed and deepened her relationship with nature and how she can bring this into her practice:

The Quest gave me some affirmation of my existing relationship with nature, my connectedness to all parts of my life, but it's deepened that. I'm encouraged to bring this into people's everyday lives, to help them re-member that we are part of nature, and there's a ripple effect to our broader community and this planet we live on.

She clarified:

When we 're-member' we are recognising that our relationship or kinship with the natural world has always existed. That we are nature, but over time we've just been distracted by a socially constructed way of being that separates us from this essence.

The emphasis on "*re-membering*" signals not the

creation of a new relationship, but a restoration of awareness, an ontological shift from separation to belonging. This demonstrates that nature connection practices can be of significance for practitioners' implicate level understanding of themselves and their place in the world and their work.

The significance of **place** *and cultural context*

Holding the workshops at Nungeena Aboriginal Corporation for Women's Business was an intentional research design choice; however, the significance of this place as a women's sacred site and in the presence of Mount Beerwah ("*Mother Mountain*") exceeded initial expectations. For many participants, particularly those who identify as non-Indigenous, being on this Country evoked layered reflections on ancestry, welcome and colonial history.

One participant shared:

This is a really special Aboriginal women's space. So that element...you know...my ancestors don't come from this country, and there's so many layers of feeling accepted or feeling welcomed to be here that is deeply healing by being on this Country.

Another reflected after listening to a Traditional Owner speak about the spiritual significance of the site on a sense of shared ancestral energy:

It was so wonderful to hear that we **can** *connect to their (First Nation people's) ancestors, because that was one of my questions: as non-Indigenous people can we really have an experience somewhat similar to First Nations peoples?*

Listening to the TO guest gave a third participant the sense that her Celtic ancestry and TO's First Nations ancestry are "*drawing from the same pool of energy, and we may be able to talk with whoever's ancestors we are meant to, the creator's spirit*". These accounts suggest that connection to *place* was mediated not only through ecological experience but through story, cultural meaning, and relational ethics.

Furthermore, Mount Beerwah itself became an active relational presence in participants' narratives. One participant described drawing strength from the Mountain during workplace challenges:

I feel her (Mt Beerwah's) steady presence, as a resource... from being there and being on that land. I have her story **in** *me. I don't have to see her [per se], you know, she's there. It's like this solid mother that's holding us all.*

Another shared how the Mountain is an important part of her workplace relationships:

I see Mother Mountain every morning when I come into the Neighbourhood Centre [for work]. I say hello to her and Mount Tibrogargan every morning. There's a new relationship there that's really lovely.

Similarly, reflecting on the immersive solo "Soul Quest" day, one participant shared about the importance of place in providing clarity and guidance in life and work:

It gave me so much clarity. It's helped me clarify my soul purpose, which is to bring love, joy and creativity to the world. I have named this year as 'Creative Joy 2026'. I'm on a journey of becoming an art therapist, and the path for how I want to live my life is clear. I want to be the best version of myself.

These narratives strongly resonate with Blackie's (2018) argument that place is not a neutral backdrop to human life but an active, formative force. In participants' accounts, the Mountain functioned as resource, teacher, witness and stabilising presence suggesting that the landscape participates in identity formation while supporting life decisions and meaning making. This suggests that *place* is an important resource influencing peoples implicate level practice, which may shape how they show up in the world and their work (Kelly and Westoby, 2018).

Integration into professional practice

Strengthened ecological identity and attuning to place translated into implicate practice in several ways; some practitioners described developing a more collaborative relationship with nature in their work, as one participant remarked: "*...my next step is to connect to the nature in my space so we can heal [clients] together*". In a similar vein, another shared that nature has become a resource in practice:

I have [now] integrated it [nature] into my therapy sessions - by this I mean I ask people how often they are going to sit in nature and just be. For those with significant mental health issues...I now use 'grounding' as a term for them to just walk outside and begin to notice the world around them.

Participants also described epistemological shifts through seeing patterns in nature reflected in community processes, expanding how they see their work. Here, nature and *place* become sources of learning and reflection, informing professional judgment and practice. One wrote:

I'm more aware that the patterns I see in nature are the same as in community - diversity, resilience, interdependence. It's shifted how I see my work.

As previously stated, Kelly and Westoby (2018) describe the implicate level of practice as the inner terrain shaping how practitioners show up in their practice. After the workshops, participants described increased self-awareness of their own state of being and how this is important in a professional context. For example:

It drew my attention to the art of self-regulation and being aware of my own 'state of being' and being able to see more clearly other's state of being.

The observational practices (Donovan & Westoby, 2024) were particularly transferable to work contexts, particularly in relation to a slower pace of work and resisting manic grind culture (Han, 2015). One participant reflected:

The practices helped me trust that I can slow down and still do meaningful work- it's a different kind of productivity.

Another noted a difference in *how* they see and how this impacts *what* they see in a professional setting:

The variances in the observational writings drew my

attention to 'the lens in which we see the world' and how personal / professional views impact the way in which we see things.

Together, these accounts suggest that nature connection practices shaped participants implicate practice, through their way of being and connection to place, their own sense of embodiment and through that framework of practice their approaches to productivity and presence.

Discussion

This study set out to explore if and how place-based nature connection practices support community practitioners to deepen their relationship with the natural world, sustain their wellbeing and enhance their professional practice. Based on the findings, nature connections practice based in *place* are important for practitioner wellbeing and may change our understanding of community practice in several ways.

The importance of relationship to place

Although participants reported a relatively high baseline connection to nature, qualitative findings indicated a shift in the quality of that relationship. Participants increasingly described nature as a *relational presence* and *collaborator* rather than a backdrop or resource reflecting Blackie's (2018) understanding of place-shaping identity. This suggests an ontological shift consistent with *people-as-place* (Zaph, 2010) and Green or Eco-Social Work perspectives, where humans are understood as embedded within rather than separate from ecological systems. The place where we held the research also mattered, as did the time taken for this project. Doing the workshops over a four-month period at the same place supported participants to see ecological connection as an ongoing process expanding their understanding of themselves (implicate practice) and their community practice work.

Furthermore, conducting workshops at Nungeena and in relationship with nearby 'Mother Mountain' (Mount Beerwah) supported participants to experience nature as culturally and spiritually meaningful, both personally and professionally, not just physically restorative. Our findings showed that intentionally slowing down and connecting to nature in this spiritually significant place allowed people to connect to and learn from Australian Aboriginal culture and Dreaming stories. Importantly, engagement with Aboriginal philosophical perspectives deepened participants' understanding of relationality and custodial ethic. Drawing on Irene Watson (2017:209), Mary Graham (2017) articulates a custodial ethic grounded in the "*law of reciprocity*": the land looks after us and we look after it, repeating reciprocally. Within Aboriginal ontologies, the Dreaming establishes law, identity, obligation and kinship in relation to specific *place.* This mirrors Berrett's (2025) argument that connecting with nature is not only relational in a general sense, but shaped and deepened by connection to specific places over time.

Participants' narratives of kinship, welcome and connection resonate strongly with this custodial ethic and relationship linked to *place*. While care must be taken not to conflate experiential resonance with Indigenous epistemology, the findings suggest that place-based nature connection practices *can* create conditions for practitioners to appreciate relational ontologies. These challenge Western separations of human and environment and may translate in how they show up in their lives and work.

Nature connections shapes practitioners' wellbeing, resistance to manic grind culture and influences their practice

Through the nature connection practices, participants described increased self-regulation, patience, groundedness and acceptance of slower rhythms. These shifts align with implicate practice such as presence, self-awareness and critical reflection (Kelly & Westoby, 2018). Rather than functioning primarily as individualised self-care techniques, practices supported a reorientation toward expanded observational capabilities and ecological grounding, echoing Donovan and Westoby's (2024) reflections on the importance of resisting manic machine culture prevalent in modern community work. This suggests sustaining-self is less about individually *coping* with pressure and more about sense-making of the consequences of disconnection from nature (and our bodies). It is about transforming one's relationship to work, time and responsibility.

Participants reported integrating nature-based practices into their work and drew on ecological metaphors to understand social processes through learning from living processes. Observational practices fostered openness to multiple perspectives and heightened awareness of practitioners' own state of being, consistent with Kelly and Westoby's (2018) understanding of implicate practice and Donovan and Westoby's (2024) reflection on living process and how it can enable greater 'seeing' of social change work (Westoby, 2022). Importantly, participants described a growing sense of legitimacy in using nature-based approaches in their work, challenging dominant professional norms that typically privilege outcome-driven modalities.

A new dimension of implicate level practice

Significantly, the research findings suggest that nature connection is not peripheral to community development practice, but foundational to how these practitioners understand their implicate identity, build resistance to grind manic culture and deepen and expand place-based practice. Importantly, Mother Mountain became an important relational connection for many and in some cases the natural world became a collaborator in their professional practice. From the stories shared, we infer those practitioners experienced themselves as "*people-as-place*" (Zaph, 2010), which may lead to a longer term embodied and living orientation towards place and ecological connection and care. Thus, in these times of ecological crisis, we argue for its inclusion in a practitioner's implicate practice.

We posit a tentative conceptual framework which further develops Kelly and Westoby's (2018) implicate level practice. We suggest it as 'tentative' because future

research might further explore and theory-test the long-term behavioural implications of strengthened ecological identity, particularly in community-based work.

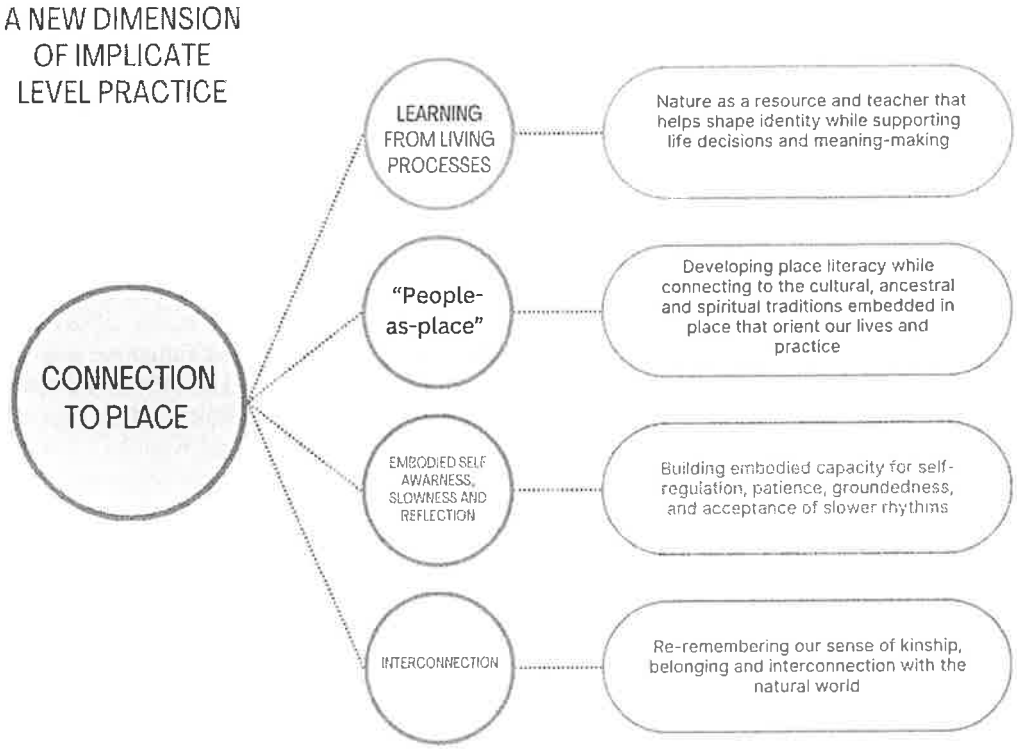

Figure 2: Connection To Place: A New Dimension of Implicate Level Practice

The Connection to Place implicate dimension includes four elements (from top to bottom): *Learning from Living Processes, People-as-Place, Embodied Self Awareness, Slowness and Reflection, and Interconnection.* Together, we argue that these elements may support practitioners implicate practice in a variety of ways:

Their capacity to learn from living processes when they see nature as a resource and teacher (Top circle). This in turn may support both their own well-being and practice within communities.

Drawing on Indigenous epistemologies, such as those introduced – Mary Graham, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Irene Watson – the People-as-Place element (Second circle) may help practitioners develop *place* literacy, through connections to the cultural, ancestral and spiritual traditions of place.

Building an embodied capacity for self-regulation, patience, groundedness and acceptance of slower rhythms (Third circle), may assist practitioners in critical reflection and to resist manic grind culture.

The bottom (fourth) circle of interconnection serves to remind practitioners that we are inextricably connected to the natural world, supporting our sense of belonging and kinship.

Conclusion

Overall, this research project shows that nature connection can enhance community development practice, particularly at implicate level work. Part reflections showed that nature connection practice contribute to deepened ecological identity ground relational ontologies where the sense of *connectio place* is significant. It showed an increased alignr between ecological awareness and professional pr and in particular, a reorientation from productivity practice toward slower, relational engagement tha different ways of seeing and learning from place, implicate level practice.

This study contributes to the growing body of Green Social Work and community work literatur demonstrating that sustained, place-based, relatior practices can reshape both inner life and outer pra In a time of ecological crisis and professional burn reconnecting practitioners to place may be less of therapeutic luxury and more a practical necessity supports a new kind of community practice.

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