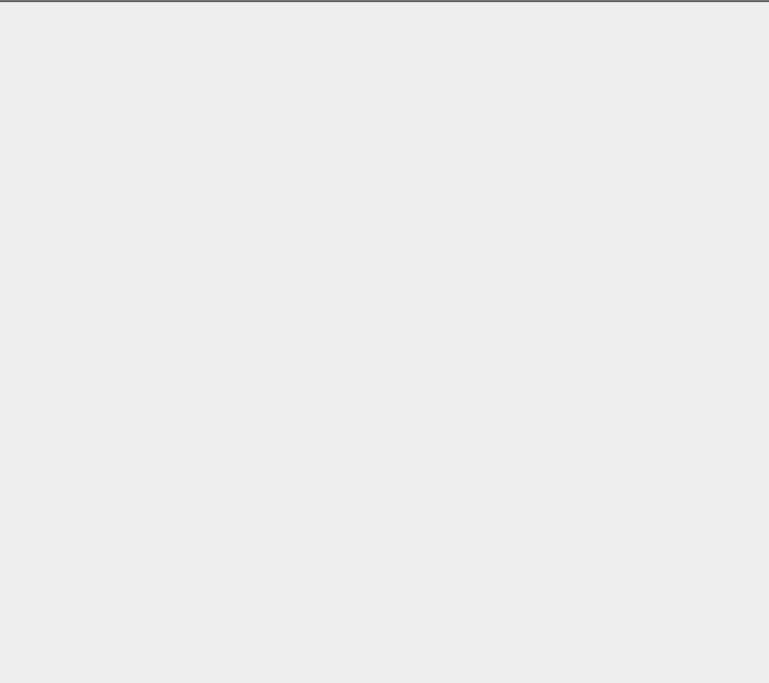


# CAPTURING NATURE



*AN INVESTIGATION ON  
DESCRIPTIONS AND  
MEANINGS OF NATURE*

GRADUATION RESEARCH 2021  
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# ABSTRACT

In my research document, I investigate human perceptions of the definitions and meanings of the term 'nature' and the ways we, humans, make connections with 'nature'. There is a long-lasting perceived separation between human and nature, especially in a western culture like The Netherlands. This separation can affect the way people perceive themselves in nature, their values, and behavior. During my research, I am investigating in what way this human-environment interaction can be brought to light. Everyone creates their own frames and contexts around subjects and meanings. By investigating the contemporary ways of making connections to nature among participants of my research, documenting, visualising and looking for 'connectedness with nature', I am capturing a snapshot of the present-time. At the hand of creating a representation of what 'nature' means for us, questions are yielded about what this may represent in the future. By looking at an observation of what we see as our world and nature within our own contexts and frames, we can connect to nature in a new way.

# INTRODUCTION



# INTRODUCTION

The concept of nature is something that intrigues me. The idea of it is something difficult to comprehend, because there can be more than just one definition and there are many different ways in which humans make contact with it everyday; from walking outside on a beach, to eating from a wooden table. The way people from western industrialized countries position themselves in nature is an interesting subject to look at here. The definitions we give to 'nature' and the social agreements on this can be of great importance for the way we deal with our environment. So how do people define 'nature'? And to what extent do people see themselves as a part of nature? Our perception of nature and the human-environment interaction in the Netherlands as a western culture is the area that I am investigating in my research. In this area, I want to find out more about whether there is a perceived separation between humans and nature through my research. The main question for my project therefore is:

***In what way can the human-nature interaction be brought to light, with a view to the definitions that are attached to it?***

During my project I am researching different perceptions of what 'nature' means for people and what the different relationships with nature entail. Everyone connects to nature in different little ways, and some people can't even connect to nature the way they want to, while it would make them feel happier or more at peace.

Because the term 'nature' can be interpreted in so many ways, I want to find out what overarching elements in this are. The word 'nature' can have many lingual descriptions, but what does this nature look like from a visual aspect? By capturing contemporary descriptions of 'nature' and human 'connectedness with nature' we might learn more about these questions and ourselves as human beings as well.

The approach for my project involves fundamental questions and focuses more on underlying issues that speak indirectly to applied matters. In the first chapter: **The Concept of Nature**, I am investigating more about the different perceptions and definitions of the term 'nature'. In order to capture contemporary definitions of 'nature', I am conducting a survey about this. The research I am carrying out will be based on different perceptions of 'connectedness to nature' and 'nature' from a group of 86 participants that all live in The Netherlands. By investigating the ways that these participants search for 'connectedness to nature' and define 'nature', I intend to grasp a snapshot of the present time, creating a representation of what nature is now. These different ways of connecting with nature will be the subject of the second chapter: **Ways of Connecting With Nature**. I will especially focus on the participants in my participant-group that finds 'connectedness to nature' something important and fundamental for themselves.

My investigation will consist of analyses of the participant descriptions, documentations and visualisations of these descriptions of 'nature'. In the third chapter: **Imaging Nature**, I am looking for a bridge between the lingual and the visual descriptions of nature. By creating visualisations and using images with language, I want to strengthen the ways of experiencing nature, especially for those who feel very distanced from it. So I will incorporate my own artistic vision on this subject and include my own interpretations of the descriptions collected, in which I am searching for nature that is around us every day. These interpretations will form an overview of what we call 'nature'(see figure 1). It will show what nature is now to a certain extent, with subjective perspectives.



Figure 1: A sketch of what this overview of nature could look like

# THE CONCEPT OF NATURE

# HOW PEOPLE DEFINE 'NATURE'?

When trying to get a grasp of what nature is to us, I should start with the definition of it. I investigated the definition of nature and there is not just one simple definition I found out. In the Cambridge Dictionary, the first definition that is given is the following:

*'Nature - All the animals and plants in the world and all the features, forces and processes that exist or happen independently of people, such as the weather, the sea, mountains, reproduction and growth'* (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021)

The matter that fascinates me immediately, is that it states that nature is something that exists independently from humans or human activity. In this I recognize the way many people relate to nature and the way nature is spoken of in everyday contexts. The definition from the dictionary in this context is used as a common understanding of nature. In the Netherlands, for example, many people; from politicians, biologists and farmers to bird watchers, have an opinion about how nature is doing and whether there is enough of it. It is logical that they need to place themselves out of nature, in order to think of nature and have an opinion about this. But in order to know how nature is doing in this small country, there is a fundamental question to be answered first: What is nature here exactly? (Venhuizen, 2021)

When looking further into the initial definitions of nature that I can find, I notice many thinkers and philosophers that have their own definitions and thoughts on the idea of nature as well. From this, I can already tell a bit that it is quite complicated to give a definition of nature. In Timothy Morton's book *Ecology without Nature* for example, he talks about this difficulty as well:

*"Whether we think of nature as an environment, or as other beings (animals, plants and so on), it keeps collapsing either into subjectivity or into objectivity. It is very hard, perhaps impossible, to keep nature just where it appears - somewhere in between."* (Morton, 2009)

The book *Keywords - A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, focuses on the sociology of language. The word 'nature' is also included:

*"Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language. It is relatively easy to distinguish three areas of meaning: (i) the essential quality and character of something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings. Yet it is evident that within (ii) and (iii), though the area of reference is broadly clear, precise meanings are variable and at times even opposed."* (Williams, 2014)

The two last areas that Williams describes and how there are not exactly precise meanings attached to them is the area that I am researching in. The dynamic relationship between human and nature in this definitely plays a role. Although humans can be seen as part of nature, human activity is often understood as a different thing than nature. In the article *What does 'nature' mean?*, Frédéric Ducarme and Denis Couvet write about the idea and definition of the word 'nature' and its different meanings in contemporary European languages. They address the importance of the linguistic diversity of vision of 'nature' for nature preservation when proposing policies.

*"Nowadays, several conflicting meanings of the word "nature" are recorded together in European dictionaries" - "There have always been many different policies of nature, and the main reason appears that there are many different conceptions of nature, which do not entail the same priorities, objects, and methods. These conceptions change with philosophical groundings, and are then deeply rooted in people."* (Ducarme & Couvet, 2020, p.4)

So the linguistic aspects of this subject is a relevant thing to look at. It makes me think of the Sapir-Whorf-Hypothesis: this hypothesis refers to the notion that the language that someone speaks influences the way someone thinks about reality (Kihlstrom & Park, 2018, p.839). Is it the definitions of 'nature' that are given to us that determine our way of thinking about it and making a connection with it? That would mean that our contemporary philosophical groundings on this topic must be at least partly based on this. These philosophical groundings are a good point to acknowledge.

The book *Landmarks* by Robert Macfarlane, touches upon this linguistic aspect as well. It shows the importance and the power of language that can shape our sense of place (Macfarlane, 2016). When being indifferent to the distinction between things like natural phenomena, they go unseen. When there is no language for something, there is no attention for it as well, because less people will be able to name it. Macfarlane also sees this disappearance of words as something that can be of influence for children's lives. With his illustrated book *The Lost Words*, he stands against the disappearance of wild childhood and the rapid fading of wild imagination and play. He created this poetic, illustrative book to celebrate nature words and the natural world they invoke. It serves as a wild dictionary of lost nature words (Morris & Macfarlane, 2017) (see figure 2).



Figure 2: A celebration of the word 'acorn' (Morris & Macfarlane, 2017).

I do recognize myself in the definition given by the Cambridge Dictionary. I also tend to see the definition of nature as something that hasn't been touched by human hands. An overgrown area of plants with animals, that hasn't yet been overrun by people. Or an environment that is not cultivated, an outside world. On the other hand, when I think about whether I see myself as part of nature, I do doubt whether I am just as much part of it as animals are for example. Why can I, as a human, feel so distanced from nature sometimes? What has made us distinguish ourselves from nature? As Ben Rogers asks in his Philosophical overview of *The Nature of Value and The Value of Nature*:

*"Does the natural environment have an intrinsic value, or is it valuable only in relation to us?" (Rogers, 2000, p.315)*

This quote also touches upon the question whether humans should count themselves in when looking at the definition of 'nature'. All these thoughts about 'nature' led me to find out more about the different perceptions of 'nature' and ways people find connections with nature. To create a more clear view on what people around me interpret as 'nature', I conducted an online survey among a group of participants asking about this. In this survey I asked for example what it means for them to be 'connected with nature' and why this is of importance or not important for them. With the group of participants, I wanted to create a representation to some extent of their view on this subject. I spread the survey as wide as possible in The Netherlands, looking at different age groups (see figure 4), living environments (see figure 5a and 5b) and working statuses as well. From these first results I designed some visual ways of expressing the numbers of people and their reaction ratio (see figure 3,4 and 5). I started with sharing the survey within my personal network, and asked the first participants to keep on sharing the survey. This helped to get more different answers and a wider range of people, that live out of my own bubble, to get results from. This way of sharing resulted in a participant group of 86 people (see figure 3).

The results I got from conducting the survey confirmed the definition given the Cambridge Dictionary in a way, because the majority of the participants' descriptions of 'nature' were described as something that happens without humans or human activity. Also words such as 'pristine', 'green' and 'living things' came forward. Although many of the answers could be related to the dictionary definition, still all the answers were slightly different from each other. It showed me how subjective this term can be and in how many ways you can interpret 'nature':

Participant: *"Anything not made by humans."*

Participant: *"Everything that grows without too much influence from people."*

Participant: *"Everything that is natural, both outside and within us."*

From all the different descriptions I received, I could make some sort of division in the types of answers. Some answers stated nature clearly as something that has nothing to do with human activity, others as something that exists alongside human activity, and the rest as part of human activity (see figure 6).

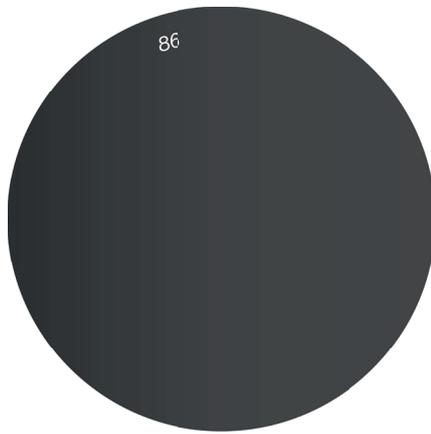


Figure 3: A visualisation of the total participant group (see appendix A for all survey results).

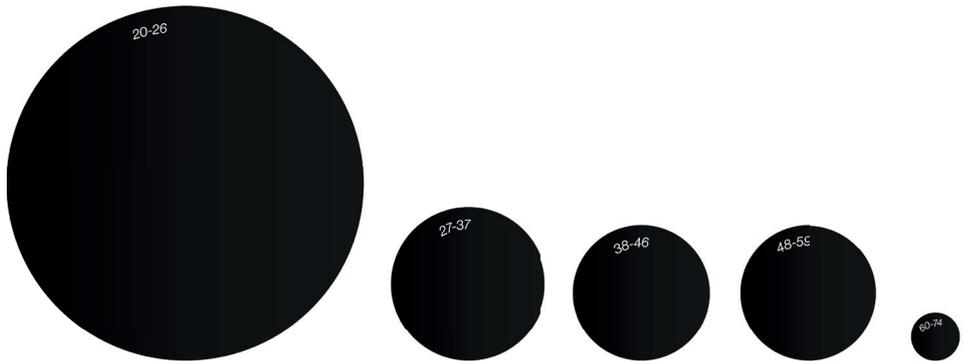


Figure 4: A visualisation of the participants' age groups (see appendix A for all survey results).

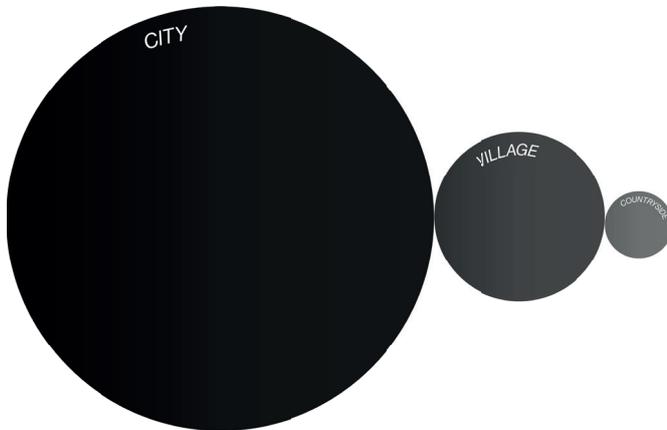


Figure 5a: A visualisation of the participants' living areas (see appendix A for all survey results).

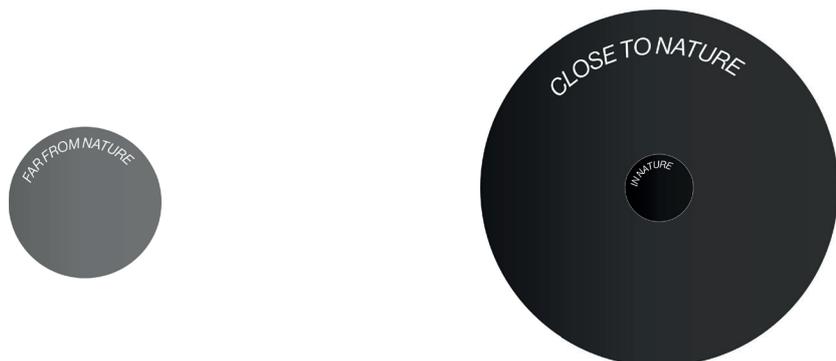
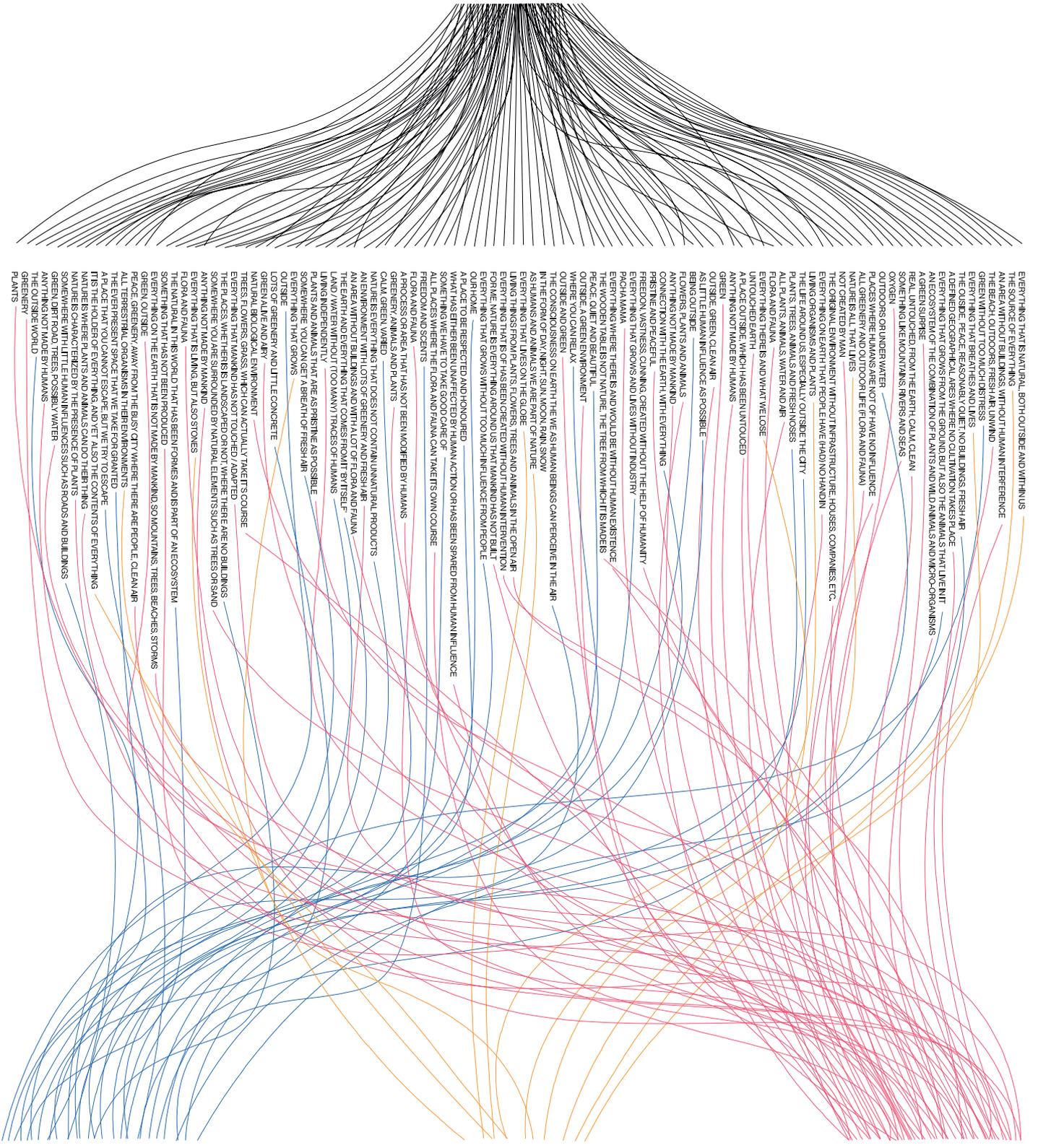


Figure 5b: A visualisation of the participants' living areas (see appendix A for all survey results).

# NATURE IS:



WITH HUMANS

HUMAN

NON HUMAN

Figure 6: A visualisation of the participants' descriptions of 'nature' (see appendix A for all survey results)

# TO WHAT EXTENT DO PEOPLE SEE THEMSELVES AS A PART OF NATURE?

In the survey I conducted, I also asked questions about what it means for the participants to be connected with nature, and whether they find being connected with nature something of importance (see figure 7). To be connected with nature can be interpreted in different ways I discovered. The results showed me that some of the participants described 'connectedness with nature' as 'rest and relaxation', 'appreciation of nature and respect', 'thinking about nature' and 'being outside and breathing in fresh air'. Only two out of 86 participants didn't really see how you can ever not be 'connected with nature' because they viewed themselves as part of nature (see figure 8). So a follow up question I asked was whether the participants saw themselves as a part of nature. Before answering this question, the participants had already defined their descriptions of nature in which the majority described 'nature' as something 'humanless'. The results were, in a way, still surprising with the knowledge of the participants' descriptions of 'nature'. The participants who answered 'Other, namely' said mostly that they thought it was difficult to decide (see appendix A for all survey results). To quote some answers:

*Participant : "Actually yes, but it feels less like that."*

*Participant: "That's how I see myself, but I don't feel like that"*

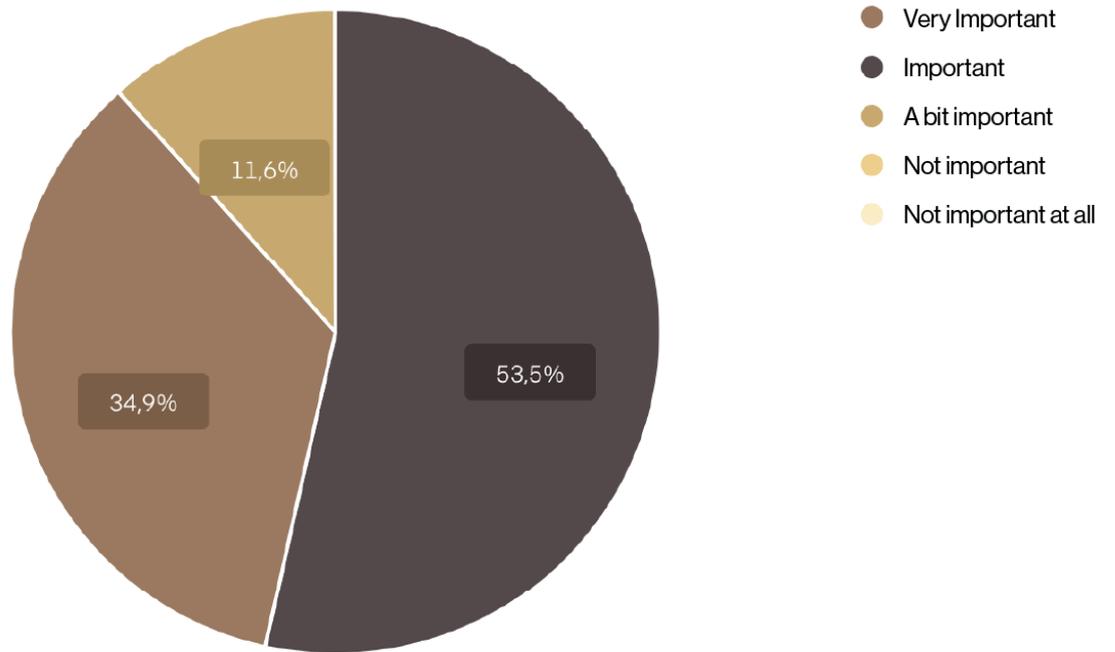


Figure 7: Question 8: How important do you think it is to be connected with nature? The two answers 'Not important' and 'Not important at all' have not been checked as answers by anyone (see appendix A for all survey results).

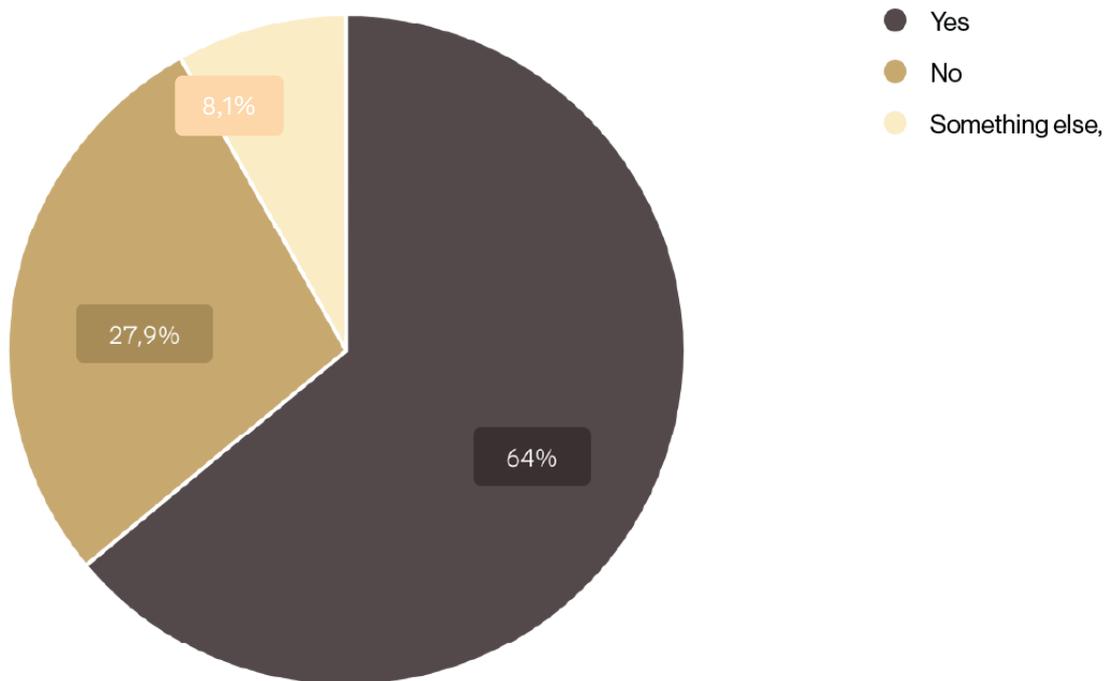


Figure 8: Question 10 results: Do you see yourself as a part of nature? (see appendix A for all survey results)

# WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS OF 'CONNECTEDNESS WITH NATURE'?

The importance of being connected with nature was also something I was curious about and collected answers from in my survey. There were many answers that talked about 'the basis of our being' (see appendix A for all survey results).

*Participant: "I think it is important to "respect" nature and if you feel more connected to nature, you will probably respect it more and keep it intact. We are also part of nature, so taking care of nature is also taking care of yourself. Moreover, it is healthy to be in nature."*

*Participant: "It puts your own existence in perspective and brings you to the basis of our being. That's on a spiritual level. Practically, it contributes to the care of the world, which is essential for the survival of our species."*

*Participant: "If you are not connected to your human nature then you make it difficult for yourself to live a worthwhile and happy life. If you are not connected to the physical / external nature you are more likely to miss the inspiration and wisdom needed to understand your own nature as well. In addition, it is important to understand the world at all. Of course, the sense of "belonging" can mean many different things. I mean that you are there often and learn from it."*

*Participant: "We are nature ourselves. Being connected to nature lets you be connected to your essence and lets you focus on what matters."*

It was very interesting to see different descriptions of nature and connectedness with nature. The main thing that stood out to me, was that all the open answers were indeed different, but I noticed that this was mostly because the participants had a different wording for something similar in essence. I can conclude from this research that 'connectedness with nature' and the importance of this is subjective and can have different meanings for everyone, but the definitions of 'nature' and the human roles in nature are for most people within my test group very similar and come down to the same values.

# WHERE DOES THE DISCONNECTION COME FROM AND WHY IS THIS SOMETHING TO AVOID?

From all these results and the research I conducted, I noticed some sort of a perceived separation between humans and nature, especially for people living in a city, feeling remote from 'real nature'. This is not something new when you look back into the work of nineteenth century romantic poets of nature like William Wordsworth. Wordsworth lived in a time of mechanization wherein the world became more urbanised. He made an emphasis on humans being 'one' with nature and the importance of the positive influence of nature on the human's existence. He could also be seen as an ecological poet when we look at his enthusiastic view on the beauty of nature and the close relationship between humans and nature (Neoenglish, 2010; Xiuzhi, 2017). During this time, this separation between humans and nature was something to take into account, and was possibly seen as something negative or threatening for us.

John Berger also writes about the book *History and Class Consciousness* by György Lukács, in his book *Why Look At Animals?* (Berger, 2009). He points out how Lukács describes nature as a value concept:

*"A value opposed to the social institutions which strip the man of his natural essence and imprison him. 'Nature thereby acquires the meaning of what has grown organically, what was not created by man, in contrast to the artificial structures of human civilization.'"*  
(Lukács, 1972)

In the article and the abstract from *The Distinction between Humans and Nature: Human Perceptions of Connectedness to Nature and Elements of the Natural and Unnatural* (Vining, Merrick & Price, 2008) I read the following:

*"The perceived separation between humans and nature may have implications for subsequent environmental values, attitudes, and behavior. This research examines people's perceptions of their connection to nature as well as their ideas about what constitutes natural and unnatural environments.... Gaining an understanding of this apparent contradiction may lead to a better awareness of the importance of people's perceptions of themselves in nature and how that perception relates to general human-environment interactions as well as management and policy."*

This research is exactly showing this contradiction between people's descriptions of 'nature', their own positioning towards nature and the importance of creating awareness of people's perceptions on this. I can relate very well to this research and also see the interests and importance of gaining a better understanding of our relationship with nature and our positioning in it. In an interview with Timothy Morton, he talks about how even

the whole concept of nature can actually be disastrous for different reasons, for example that it separates the human from the non-human world and affects the way we deal with our social space. With this, he says that by using the term nature, we actually create that separation for ourselves, which can have negative consequences for our ecological awareness, while the line between the two are actually very ambiguous. (Morton, 2016):

*“Nature is a sort of anthropocentrically scaled concept, designed for humans, so it’s not strictly relevant to thinking about ecology.”* (Morton, 2016)

This makes me think about how I can create an outlook on our perceptions of nature in western/dutch culture that brings people new insights in this and yields questions about our position on this earth. This also touches upon the (ecological) awareness of people’s perceptions on this. It could serve as a collection of widely interpretable descriptions of nature in the present-time that gives insights in our different ways of connecting with nature. In this I want to draw more attention to the separation that is happening between human and nature, by letting the readers think about this concept for themselves.

Displaying these different descriptions of nature without reinforcing this separation is a very difficult thing to do, because these boundaries between human and nature are so fuzzy. The work of J.G. Heck, especially his Pictorial Archive of Nature and Science and his iconographic encyclopedia is very opposed to this (Heck, 2013). By creating a compilation of illustrations and information, he created a very structured view on what nature and science looks like and means for his readers (see figure 9). This way of classifying different elements from ‘nature’ actually puts emphasis for the readers to look at the images as being part of something outside of the human world.

So for my collection, I want to include the role humans play when thinking of the definition of nature. I read an article on the Parliament of Things (Simmelink, 2017) and came across a quote that also shows the importance of regarding ourselves as part of nature, or at least how we play a part in this:

*“Because we do not hear what nature has to say, nor even that it is saying anything at all, we treat natural entities as mere things rather than as other subjects with whom we share a common world.”* (Vogel, 2006)



Figure 9: An example of how Heck grouped elements from nature to a category ('sea-nature'), by displaying them next to each other, with small numbers that refer to the name of the concerning element (Heck, 2013).

To capture definitions of nature in the present-day engages me, because the meaning we give to it can shift over time. The lingual aspect and the meaning people give to the word nature is crucial for the way we cope with nature. By apprehending the way humans view the world nowadays and how this changes in the future, I think we can learn more about ourselves as well. Like Morton describes nature as a scaled concept, I can see the link with the philosopher Timothy Chappell about the unstablensness of the concept:

*“Nature’ is not so much anything out there as a category we have invented into which to put things; and we reinvent the category with our shifting models that describe this collection called ‘nature’, depending on the mindset of the beholder.”*  
 (Chappell & Chappell, 1997)

# FIRST CONCLUSIONS

So up till now, I have discovered more about the ways of looking at the whole concept of nature and the effects of it on the way we deal with our environment. Because the term 'nature' can be interpreted in so many ways and the line between human and nature are very abstract, I want to dive further into these different descriptions of nature and ways of connecting with nature, as I could conclude from my survey as well, that being connected with nature is seen as something important for people.

The perceived separation between humans and nature that I could detect in my survey results and learn about from the philosophers mentioned above, is something I feel a bit concerned about. On one hand, I can imagine where this separation is coming from, because especially living in a city, sometimes I also get the feeling of being very remote to what I define as 'real nature'. But on the other hand, this separation can be of influence for our environmental values, attitudes and behavior in a negative way I discovered. So gaining a better understanding of this contradiction and rethinking nature can be very beneficial in this case. To keep track of what is around us, and to keep discovering what we think we know, is an important thing to do if we want to stay aware of our environments and behavior. With my project of making this collection of different descriptions of nature, I want to bring people new insights in this and yield questions about our position on this earth. This way I want to draw more attention to the separation between human and nature, by evoking more thought about the whole concept of nature.

In the next part of my research, I will look into the different ways in which humans are in touch with nature, because the human role in nature is an element that I need to include if I want to create this collection of different descriptions. Even though there is a perceived separation between human and nature, the boundaries between human and nature are actually very fuzzy when you look at the definitions of nature that I found. It is almost impossible to exclude humans from these descriptions I learned.

# WAYS OF CONNECTING TO NATURE

# IN WHAT WAYS DO PEOPLE CONNECT TO 'NATURE'?

There are many ways to be in contact with nature and many ways to look at nature. In the proposed Anthropocene, the impact of humans on the planet is a named part. When looking at how people alter and reconstruct landscapes, build cities and resource depletions, it already becomes more clear how the relationship between humans and the natural world can work. (Hamilton, 2015)

Based on the survey results and my literature study, I can see that there is everyday contact with nature in many ways for many people, sometimes without even noticing it and other times very consciously. When I look around me and investigate the nature that I can perceive in my direct environment, I can roughly divide different types of 'everyday contact' with nature. With the help of the survey results, I could distinguish this more easily. This is the first step of creating a view on this topic that shows the relationship to humans, that becomes the base of my collection.

# LANGUAGE: DEFINITIONS OF ‘NATURE’ AND ‘CONNECTEDNESS WITH NATURE’

In the previous chapter, it becomes clear how our perceptions of nature are influenced by the linguistic aspects of the human relationship with nature. The definition we give to this word is determinative for the way we consider and treat the natural environment. Giving something a name keeps the thing more real and present, like Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris endeavor in their book *The Lost Words* (see figure 2) to arrest the decline of a language and experience in nature that are fading away.

In my survey on definitions of nature, the participants also described what being ‘connected with nature’ means for them. All of the results showed that the participants viewed being ‘connected with nature’ as something positive. This was described with different words like “peace”, “health” and “freedom” (see figure 10). To be connected to nature depends on what you define as nature.

VISITING MANY NATURE RESERVES BEING MINDFUL LEARNING ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT OF NATURE ON OUR LIVES AS HUMANS  
 PEOPLE ARE NATURE TOO STANDING IN THE GRASS WITH BARE FEET HEARING THE SOUNDS OF BIRDS AND STREAMS THE SMELL OF THE FOREST OR AFTER THE RAIN  
 PHYSICAL NATURE IS VALUABLE BECAUSE IT IS BEAUTIFUL AND PEACEFUL IT GIVES INSPIRATION AND CALMNESS IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO BE CONNECTED TO YOUR HUMAN NATURE PUTTING THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE  
 BEING CONNECTED MEANS THAT I AM ABLE TO VISIT NATURE WHEN I FEEL THE NEED TO HAVING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT NATURE LIKE ANIMALS, PLANTS OR THE CLIMATE WATCHING DOCUMENTARIES ABOUT IT  
 BEING IN IT AND BEING PART OF THE SYSTEM CONTACT WITH FLORA AND FAUNA I CAN RELAX IN NATURE AND IT IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF MY DAY  
 I FEEL CONNECTED BY REALISING I AM PART OF NATURE WHEN I AM IN A NATURAL ENVIRONMENT OR IN THE RAIN RECOGNIZING NATURE AROUND ME EVERYWHERE  
 I DONT FEEL CONNECTED TO NATURE, BECAUSE I AM A PART OF IT IT MEANS A LOT FOR ME IF THERE IS NO NATURE, THERE IS NO HEALTHY BODY  
 IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR ME WHEN I AM NOT IN NATURE FOR A LONG TIME, I GET CRANKY HAVING NOTHING STANDING BETWEEN ME AND NATURE  
 FEELING LIKE BEING MERGED INTO MY ENVIRONMENT NOTICING MYSELF AS MUCH AS THE ANIMALS AND PLANTS THAT ARE IN THE ROOM  
 BEING IN TOUCH WITH THE WORLD AROUND ME REALISING WHERE I AM REALISING WHAT I AM PART OF IT IS OF GREAT IMPORTANCE FOR MY HEALTH  
 IT MEANS A LOT TO ME, IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR BEING MINDFUL BALANCE NICE AND HEALTHY ENJOYING MY ENVIRONMENT COMING TO REST, BACK TO THE BASICS  
 A CONNECTION IN WHICH YOU GIVE AND TAKE IT BRINGS ME PEACE PEACE HAPPINESS, PEACE, BEAUTY, LIFE BEING ONE WITH EVERYTHING  
 EXPERIENCING NATURE (HEAR, SEE, SMELL) PEACE IT BRINGS ME PEACE A CHANCE TO LIVE  
 SMELLING FRESH AIR AND WANDERING WITHOUT DISTURBANCE, THE TWO MAINTAIN EACH OTHER  
 HEALTH, PEACE, SYBIOSIS REASSURANCE, PEACE COMING HOME  
 EMPTYING YOUR HEAD AND CALMING CREATES RELAXATION AND PEACE GETTING FRESH AIR, BEING OUTSIDE  
 IMPORTANT, NATURE IS PLEASANT ENJOYING NATURE, PLANTING PLANTS, LOOKING AT WHAT NATURE CAN DO TRYING TO LIVE WITHOUT BURDENING NATURE  
 IT IS JUST NICE TO WALK IN IT I LIKE TO RELAX IN NATURE IT GIVES ME PEACE BY READING ABOUT IT  
 WHEN I AM IN NATURE, I FEEL MOST CONNECTED BEING IN THE GARDEN WITH MY PLANTS BY LEARNING ABOUT IT BY NOT EATING MEAT  
 BEING THERE A LOT A PLACE YOU CAN GO TO I AM NOT CONNECTED WITH NATURE, BUT I FIND IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE GREEN AROUND ME  
 BEING AMAZED BY TREES, FLOWERS, THE SUN AND RAIN ENJOYING THE SUN OUTSIDE, HEARING BIRDS BEING AWARE OF WHAT I AM THROWING OUT  
 NATURE IS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION GETTING ENERGIZED BY SPENDING TIME IN NATURE MAKING CHOICES THAT ARE NOT HARMFUL FOR NATURE, BUT GOOD  
 BEING CLOSE TO YOURSELF, WITHOUT DAILY STRESS AND HECTICS BY WALKING IN THE FOREST I FEEL MOST CONNECTED I CAN FIND RELAXATION AND INSPIRATION  
 BEING CONNECTED TO NATURE MEANS A LOT TO ME, TO GET REST AND TO BE OUTSIDE CHARGING UP, GETTING POSITIVE ENERGY FROM IT BY BEING IN THE MOUNTAINS, FORESTS, NEAR RIVERS OR THE SEA

Figure 10: Question 6 results cutout: What does it mean to you to be connected to nature? (see appendix A for all survey results)

# HANDMADE/ARTIFICIAL NATURE

Another way of connecting with nature is very visible in our everyday lives. The concept of gardens and parks are typical examples of this. These are defined spaces specifically created for cultivation and enjoyment of plants and other forms of nature. A big feature in such places is always control and consists of a mix of natural and human-made things. Humans become the masters of nature in this concept. As I read in the book *The Meaning of Gardens: Idea, Place and Action*:

*“Gardening gives us a sense of control over a small patch of earth in spite of all that is left to chance, such as the possibility of drought and insect infestation. With control comes responsibility, commitment to stewardship of the earth. We observe, sense, and participate directly in natural processes. Through gardening, we are reconnected to “mother earth” and to the larger ecology of the world in which we live.”* (Francis & Hester, 1990)

I can relate to this idea of being in gardens and gardening to be more connected with nature in general. Being somewhere that makes you feel connected to the earth on a bigger scale, can be very calming and enjoyable for people. Especially when you can arrange it exactly the way you want it.

In *A Time Travel Through Garden History*, Nadine Olonetzky recounts the history of gardens from Roman times to today.

*“Cities and agglomerations currently continue their sprawl further and further into their surroundings; but at the same time, gardens are increasingly reconquering cities. Open green spaces emerge more on the fringes of cities.”* (Olonetzky, 2017, p.196)

But also agriculture is an example of artificial nature. An interesting aspect to view in this category is the development of permaculture as well. It was invented to find solutions to many of the problems associated with monoculture farming. With permaculture, you literally design nature around people and see people as part of the entire ecosystem.

*“Permaculture is a philosophy of working with instead of against nature”*  
(Mollison, Slay & Jeeves, 1991).

# AMBIGUOUS NATURE

With this category, I mean to name all the objects, materials and matter around us in everyday life, of which people tend to forget the origin of nature more quickly, but do associate with the term 'nature'. I can see this more as a second layer of things from nature, like the vegetables in someone's refrigerator, a wooden piece of furniture or the water that comes out of the tap. These things are not directly seen as something from nature, while it does come up indirectly when looking at it separately or thinking about it consciously. In my survey, I asked the participants about whether they have something in their homes that comes from the 'nature' they define. In these results I could see that the initial answers were the more obvious things like plants and shells, but the subsequent answers started to show the more ambiguous things like the wooden table they eat from. When thinking about objects from nature, they started to come up with more answers that you don't think of in the first instance (see appendix A for all survey results). Nature is characterized by the more obvious things and it makes me realize that the term 'nature' can be interpreted in this context of objects as well and that we are sometimes closer to our definition of nature than we initially tend to think:

*"Nature is not a place to visit. It is home."* (Snyder, 1993)

# PRESERVING AND FRAMING NATURE

With this type of contact with nature, I mean the bigger nature conservation organizations like Staatsbosbeheer in the Netherlands. These organizations demarcate natural areas. They manage, restore and develop forests, nature reserves and these natural areas. By doing so, there are appointed areas that we consider as more 'real' nature (see figure 11).

The artist Esther Kokmeijer creates her work from travelling. In her work *Monuments for a moment* (see figure 12), she marked one square metre areas on the exact centres of gravity of every EU country. In this project, she emphasizes the limited life of the mark and the reclaim by nature. I think this is another good example and metaphor of humans demarcating terrains in nature and framing nature this way. By framing an area, you will look differently at it. The preserved nature areas from Staatsbosbeheer are now seen as more 'natural' areas that must be respected and saved. This has a positive effect on these landscapes, but it does make me wonder what it does to the 'not' preserved areas. Are these places seen as less natural and pure?



Figure 11: A mapping of the demarcated area in the Betuwe (Staatsbosbeheer, 2021).



Figure 12: Overview of the square metre marked area's (Kokmeijer, 2009)



Figure 13: Snow Storm, Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth painting (Turner, 1842).

# FIGHTING NATURE (WITH NATURE)

In this category, I also look at the rather big scaled ways of making contact with nature. A 'battle' against rising sea levels is an example of this. Humans are fighting the water by building sand dunes and constructing dikes and dams. Sometimes the solutions for these natural problems are found with the help of natural resources. In an indirect way, natural resources like water-, wind- and sun-energy are ways of using nature to reduce climate change. These sorts of 'battles' between human and nature are often caused by humans in the first place. The dryness of cultivated landscapes for example, has to be solved by a large amount of water displacement. The cause of this dryness lies with a temperature rise and more extreme summers. In earlier times these 'battles' existed as well. In William Turner's paintings of sea-scenes, you can see the relationship of nature and humans very clearly. The story there was often about human ventures as violation of nature and nature's revenge on humans as a result of this violation (see figure 13).

## LOOKING FOR 'REAL' NATURE

Many people living in cities don't really see urban nature as 'real nature'. When they feel the need to be in nature, they tend to go a bit further from their own living spaces, away from high populated areas. When thinking of 'real nature', places like beaches, pristine forests or distant places in the jungle are more likely to be named (see appendix A for all survey results). This way of making contact with 'real' nature is different from the way people make contact with nature in their living environments. There is a greater distinction between cities and 'nature' and the contrast between these two are becoming more visible. Recreational use of nature and landscapes has become a popular thing in The Netherlands. People like to hike, bike, swim and sail for example. According to the article *People and nature, Recreational use of Nature and Landscape*, there are different types of motives for recreation in nature (Veer & van Middelkoop, 2002). Motives like increasing knowledge of nature, feeling connected with nature, for health reasons, for quietude or to harvest and pick natural products.

# NATURE AT HOME

And then you also have elements from nature in people's homes. The most notable thing in this are indoor plants. Many people place houseplants in their homes to feel more in touch with nature and the outside world. Besides plants, objects and souvenirs from nature are also ways for people to remind themselves of natural environments and being with nature. I asked the participants of my survey whether they have something from nature in their homes and what it makes them think of. The majority of the participants stated that they own something natural or from nature (see appendix A for all survey results). Many of the answers existed out of types of plants, but also things like rocks, shells, sand, animals and food were named. I made illustrations of a selection of these answers (see figure 14). When I asked what these objects did to them when they looked at the objects, mostly the place where it came from and the feeling they got from it was mentioned.

*"It gives me a certain peace and atmosphere in my room. It also reflects taking good care of plants and doing things with attention in my life (something I often forget to do due to busyness)"* (see appendix A for all survey results).

*"Holiday in Sweden in the forest. Camping, summer, more, freedom and happiness"* (see appendix A for all survey results).

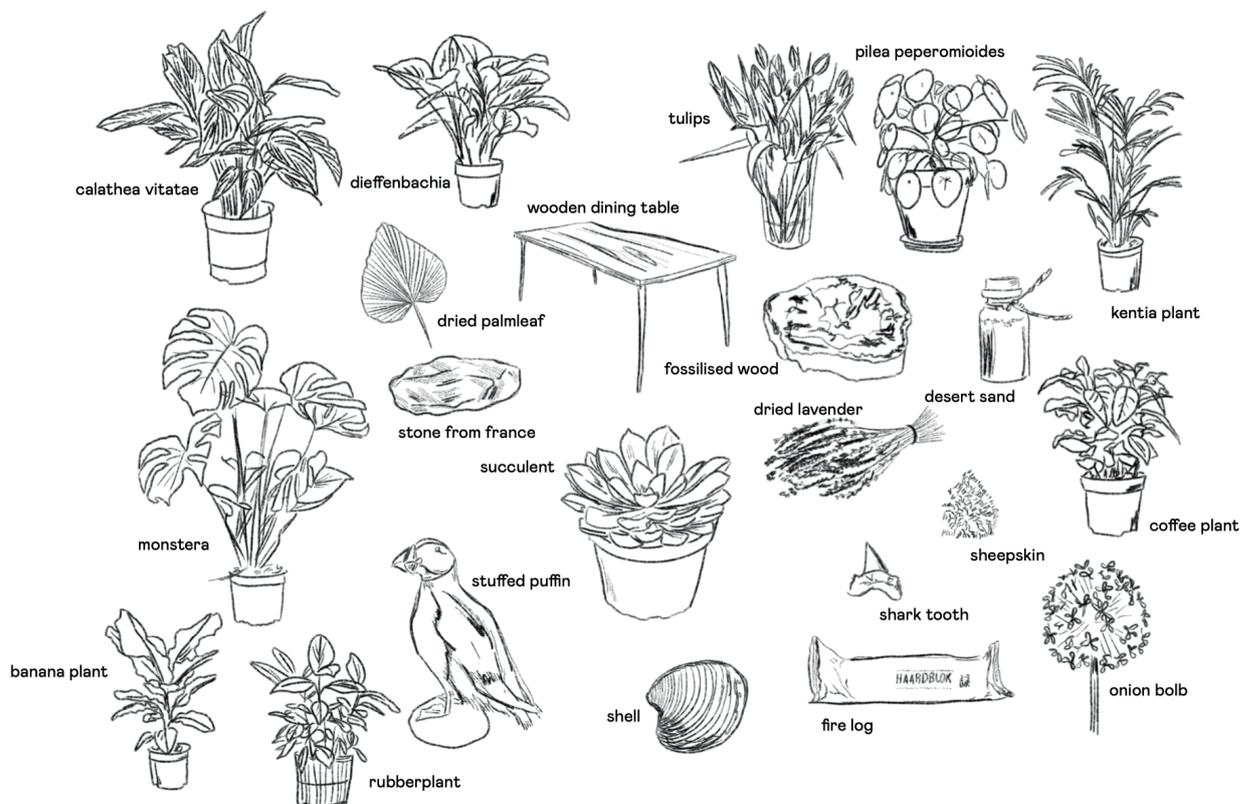


Figure 14: A selection of answers from the survey illustrated

When I look at the seven categories I distinguished, it becomes more and more clear that the concept of 'nature' can be interpreted very broadly, depending on the different contexts you place it in. By categorizing the ways of connecting to nature, it seems like I am getting a little more grip on its meaning for people, but I am sure that even within each category, there is still so much left to include. All the different ways in which we relate to nature contribute to the way we look at nature and the meaning we attach to nature.

Because I am focusing so much on the meaning and definitions of nature, I am diving more into the first category I distinguished: Language: Definitions of nature and connectedness with nature. Up till now, the descriptions I collected were all expressed in text and language, but for my project, I want to discover ways for visual expressions of this as well.

These expressions will form a representation of the dynamicness of the term nature, by looking at the different perceptions on nature from my survey participants. It will take the shape of a book, almost like a visual dictionary. By creating visuals that can summarize the term 'nature' for people, I want to bring a new way of looking at nature. Besides this, it will automatically serve as a sort of archivation of nature, wherein personal interpretations of what nature can mean come forward.

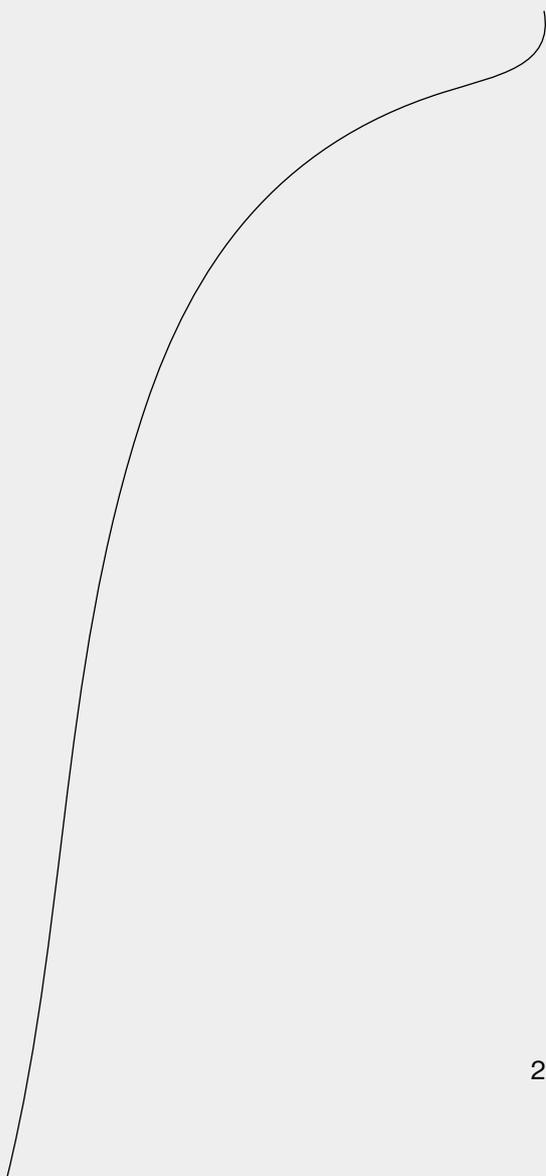
But first, I need to find ways of creating visual expressions of the written perceptions. The artist Hamish Fulton is a very interesting example of having already made a start with this bridge from language to images of nature. In his book *A Hundred Walks*, he registers the emotions, experiences and discoveries he makes while walking in nature (Fulton, 1991). He creates these visuals by using text, and playing with its compositions on the pages. The words form a new landscape that has a visual elaboration (see figure 15 and 16).



Figure 15 and 16: Compositions of landscapes in text (Fulton, 1990).

# IMAGING 'NATURE'

# DESIGNING THE BOOK



# FRAMING AND CONTEXT

It is not easy to visualise what nature is or to determine what 'connectedness with nature' looks like exactly. It remains a subjective term. The things from nature that we can see, determine its meaning for different people. This has a lot to do with the context in which we see the things around us, and how we frame things. The frames are made through language and visual imagery. Like George Lakoff describes:

*"All of our knowledge makes use of frames, and every word is defined through the frames it neurally activates. All thinking and talking involves "framing." And since frames come in systems, a single word typically activates not only its defining frame, but also much of the system its defining frame is in."* (Lakoff, 2010)

## FIRST VISUAL EXPERIMENTS

So, based on the results from the survey I conducted, I could have a look at different perceptions on what 'nature' means and what 'being connected with nature' means. It gave me more insights in these different frames people have around this subject. Firstly, I made illustrations of all the natural objects that the participants have in their homes. This was a very literal translation of the survey results, but it helped me to try out ways of creating a new overview of this category of objects (see figure 14).

The next step I took for my publication was to visualise the different answers about people's descriptions of nature. I tried to capture the feeling and ambiance of the answer rather than the literal image of their words. By doing so, I want viewers to be able to associate and interpret freely when looking at it. This way, everyone can see something different when looking at the images and link it to their own memories and frames in their heads. It will get a more poetic approach this way as well. For this, I used my own interpretations and translations of the participants' answers. In these try-outs, I also included the more abstract answers like 'going outside' and 'oxygen', to really see whether there are ways to visualise it. For these translations I took photographs, made simple illustrations and existing images to visualise the descriptions (see figure 17). I also made scans of the objects that were mentioned in the results, to capture the textures of it and try out a different technique to represent the answers (see figure 18).

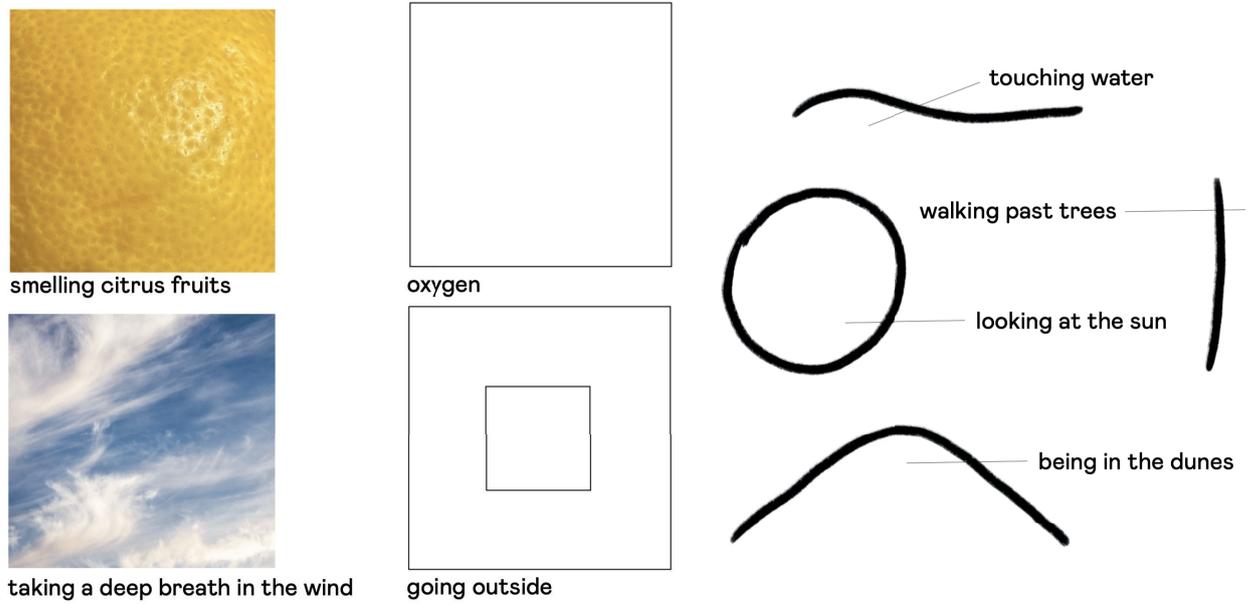


Figure 17: First visualisations of a part of the participants descriptions of nature

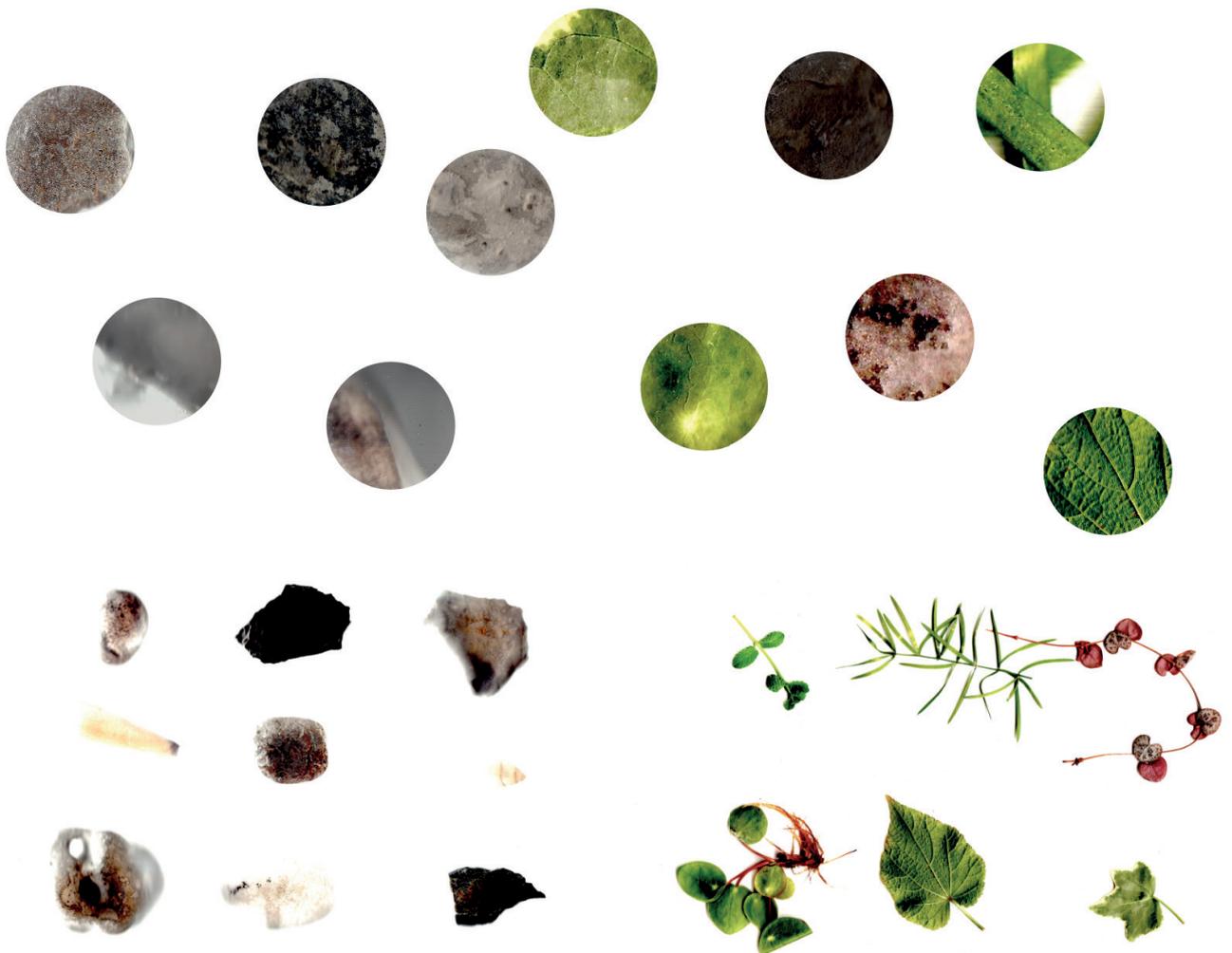


Figure 18: Scans of the objects mentioned in a part of the participants descriptions of nature

# FROM LANGUAGE TO IMAGE: CAPTURING NATURE

After these first visualisations, I tried to look for what I could find around me that is nature. By looking at what is already there, I wanted to test whether I could collect 'pieces of nature' from different contexts. So for the different ways of 'connecting with nature' I searched for existing images from existing publications that many people come across like several newspapers, books, different types of magazines and brochures. From these existing publications, I cut out all the pieces of 'nature' that I could find that related to the results from my survey. I pasted them into these squares and fit them with the right descriptions. With this I used my own interpretations of the images and answers of the participants. By using these existing images, I wanted to put the emphasis on the new context in which the reader will see it (see figure 22). By taking out a small thing from an image that doesn't even catch your eye in a newspaper, you will look at it differently and with a different type of attention. This method of separating the concept from the specific situation and reflecting more on the feeling or the deeper meaning of the word was very fitting with the concept of my project I discovered, so I investigated this more. It is a bit like tourists that are trying to take a photograph of themselves with a sight, without having other tourists and people in the picture. It also reminds me of the skyspaces of the artist James Turrell. The square opening in the roof makes the viewers look at the sky in a way they have never seen before, and creates a new frame to look at it in a new context (see figure 19). With this work he investigates the more fundamental question about perception, which is very similar to what I want to effectuate with my book.

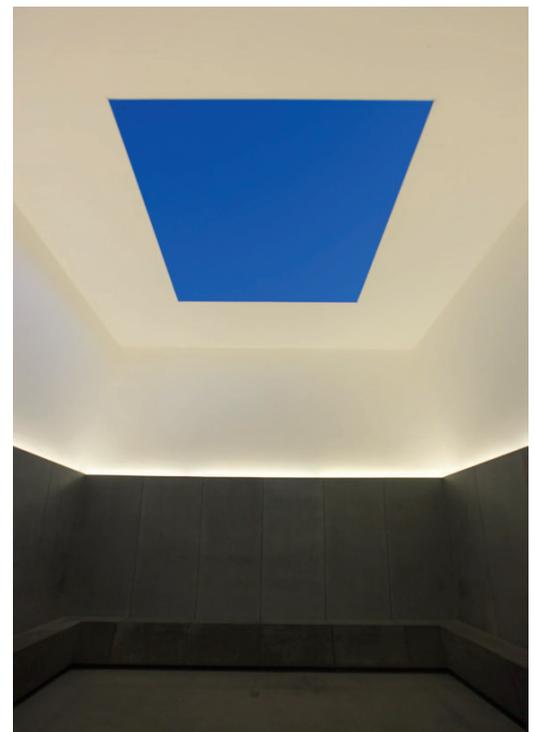


Figure 19: Sky pesher, Skyspace (Turrell, 2005).

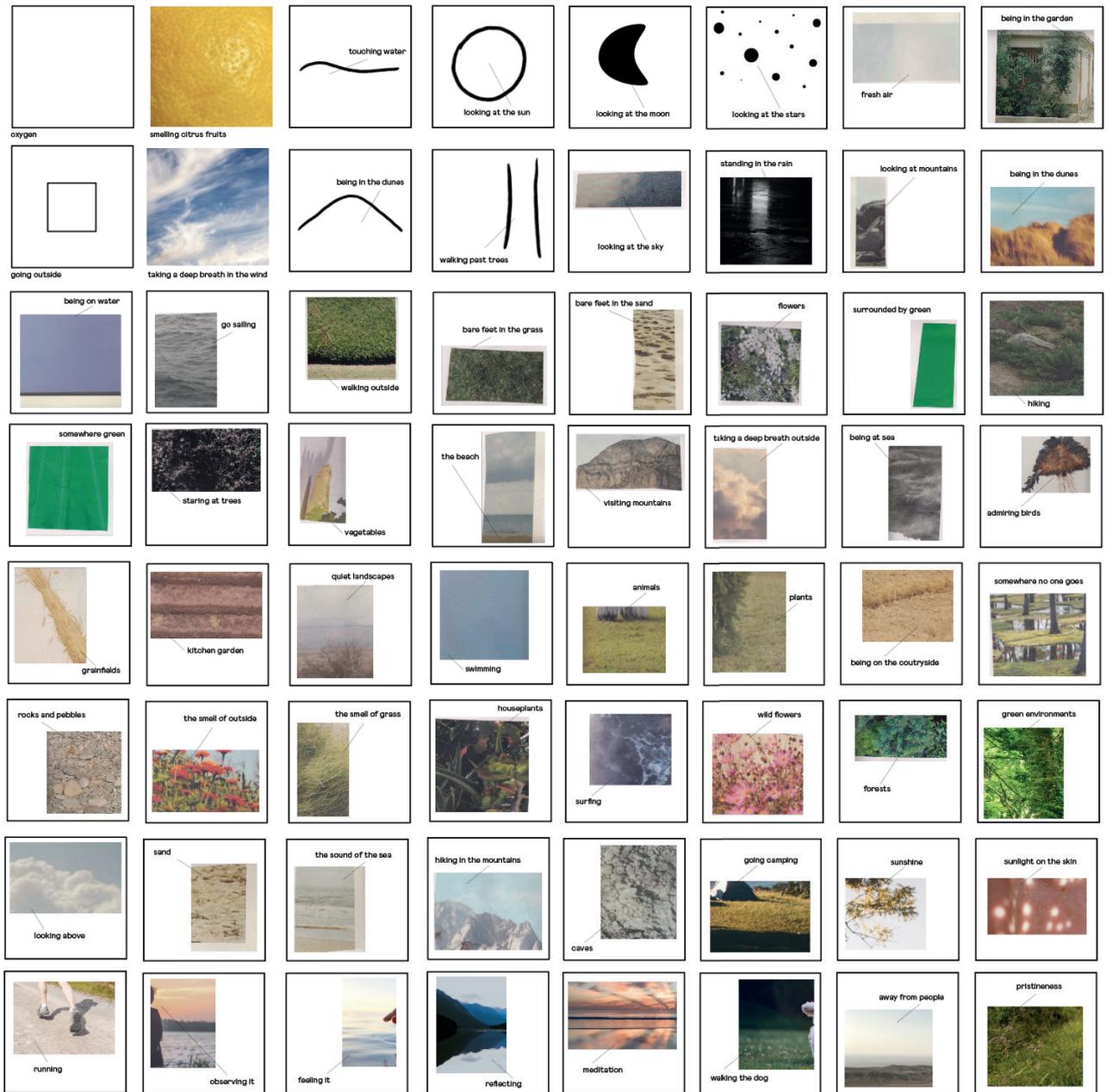


Figure 20: Cutouts of nature from existing printed matter



Figure 21: First sketch of with new frames around cut outs

From all these different sketches with cutouts, I could also distinguish smaller groups within the category of language and definitions. I noticed that these groups existed out of different subjects that people associate with nature for themselves or associated with being close to nature. From here I made the decision to make different headings for the book based on these groups (see figure 22). These headings helped me to create more visual translations as well, because a structure of something that is very ungraspable, makes what you're looking for more specific.

When placing the small cutouts in new frames, I saw that I made a whole new picture. By leaving the white space within the black frame, I actually lost a bit of the open way of looking at it and the freedom of interpretation became less, because of my decision of framing it this way (see figure 20 and 21).

So the next thing I tried was to use the cutouts over the whole page, without the black frame. This worked very well for keeping this open interpretation when looking at it. The cut out now continues off the page, as if there is more around it and the image is bigger than what you see. Also by zooming in more, there is more abstraction, which creates more freedom of interpretation for the viewer. This way of framing gives the viewer more space to link their own imagination and memories to it (see figure 23).

Because I am using small cut outs from a range of existing images, I found it interesting to include the original images somewhere in my book, for the viewer to see the original context of the image. This will also emphasize the whole point of rethinking something. So I decided to include an index for this in the back of the book (see figure 24).

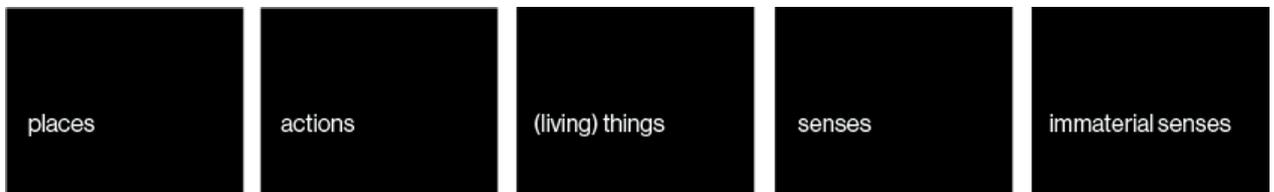


Figure 24: Headings for the book of different ways of associating with nature



Figure 23: Sketch of what a page in my book could look like when letting interpretation more open about the context of the image



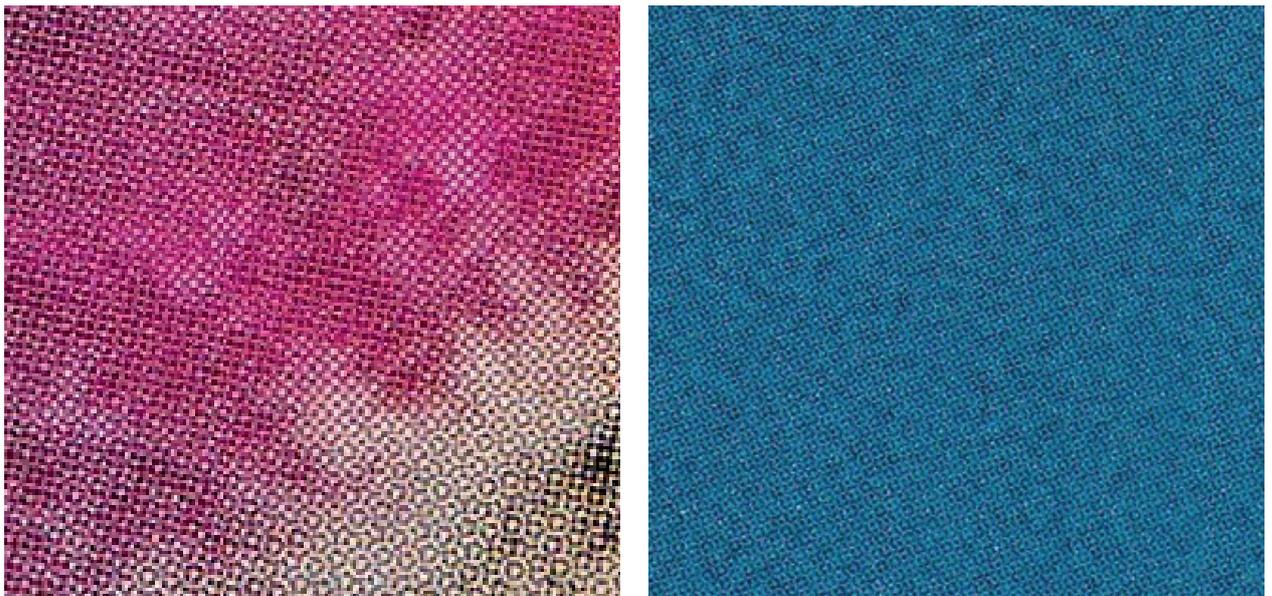
Sébastien Haller na afloop met twee ghettoasters. Soccerplayer on grassfield: De Volkskrant, p.2 Sport - 03-05-21

Figure 24: What the original image in the index would look like

# GRAPHIC DESIGN AND NATURE

The field that I am studying is graphic design, so it is not a surprise that the outcome of my project and research has a strong connection to this. When creating the more abstract visuals of nature, I could see this link the clearest. The literal zooming in on images to almost catch its essence and trying to get to the core of what we can see in pictures, makes me think of looking at something under a microscope, like cell structures of a plant. In the images I am zooming in on, you don't see cell structures of course, but you see the printing techniques that creates this more abstract image, almost unrecognizable from the original (see figure 25). The image I am zooming in on becomes very graphic this way, but in the end it is still an image of a piece of nature and you can still create your own context when looking at the images, especially with the combination of short and open textual descriptions. This way we can rethink the known and look at our role as humans regarding nature.

The form of a printed book will help with this experience, because it reminds us more of an official dictionary or encyclopedia. Next to this, the fixed visuals in my book that are printed, will always remain the same, while the way of looking at the visuals might change over time, which will add up to the concept of rethinking and the message of bringing attention to the dynamicness of the definitions that are linked to nature.



*Figure 25: Zooming in, creating an abstract image and looking at a printing technique on paper*

# CONCLUSION



# FINAL CONCLUSION

So to conclude my research about the definitions and associations people have with nature, I can say that there is a lot more going on behind the term 'nature' than I would have expected in the first place. The initial term in the dictionary has helped us to create an attempt in framing the term and everyone has roughly developed some shared associations with this given definition. But furthermore, 'nature' remains a very complicated concept and it has very dynamic, ambiguous and unstable qualities. I can almost think of nature as a process, because of its shifting meaning. It is certainly a critical point to think about these qualities. When I think of Morton, Ducarme & Couvet's vision on this, I can see that there are consequences of the whole existence of the word 'nature' for our philosophical groundings, but also the separation that we can see between humans and nature, which also can have implications for our environmental values, attitudes and behaviour if I note Vining, Merrick & Price. The social agreements on the definitions we give to nature is of great importance in this. Maybe it would be better to even let go of the whole term at all, because the unstableness of the term makes it quite dysfunctional. But then, what would be the alternative? A series of terms with all a different meaning? Or not to name it at all?

The main question I wanted to drive on in this project was: In what way can the human-nature interaction be brought to light, with a view to the definitions that are attached to it? To show this unstableness of the term, that plays a role in the human-nature interaction, I wanted to find a way for people to 'rethink the known'. By showing what context and framing can do to our own associations and letting people think about this subject in a new way, I hope to contribute to showing the human position in relation with nature. Using imaging as a means of doing so, I wanted to create a new way of approaching the subject. This research has shown me how the descriptions of nature keep changing. The images in my book will remain the same, but I am curious to see whether we will experience the same thing looking at them in a couple of years.

## **SHORT DISCUSSION**

There is a point of discussion that stood out most to me during the making of my book. In my book, I am creating visuals of the different descriptions of nature that I collected from my survey. In this, I wanted to put the emphasis on the free interpretations and associations someone can have when looking at it. In order to do so, I used my own interpretations as well. So my book has a very subjective approach, which makes it unsure for me to know whether the book evokes the reaction that I want to bring up from the viewer. Of course, I am making sure to give the right idea about the context in which I have created the book, which is of great importance for the viewer as well to give them the right perspective on the project, but still, I am aiming to test out the reactions on the book a bit with different target groups. I am especially curious about these reactions as well, because the topic of descriptions of nature has a lot to do with individual perspectives and blurry boundaries about the definitions. Besides this, another reason for me to test out my book is because I can use the first reactions on the book to improve it. This gives the book a more of an approach of participatory design, which is very logical to me as the whole content of it is based on a collaboration with my participants in a way. So for these tests, I decided on the subjects:

- Testing it out with a selection of the participants from my survey
- Testing it out with a selection of people who did not fill in my survey
- Testing it out with a possibly 'perfect' target group: people who can not get in touch with nature. For example, elderly people that are limited in their options in this and feel very remote from what they perceive as nature. My book might be an application for this group of people.

In this test I want to ask the subjects about the first reactions they have on the book, what feelings it evokes with them, what memories they think of and what interpretations they make of the visuals. For me it is the most important to know whether people can make free interpretations of my translations and whether these interpretations are different from one another. This would prove to me that the images in my book work the way I want them to.

### **SHORT REFLECTION**

During the writing of my research, I have gathered a lot of knowledge on a topic of my interest. At the beginning I was searching for the right balance between research and design, which was a challenging thing for me. It gave me the confirmation that I really see research as the basis for my projects and find it very important to do research for developing a concept. In the end, the first conclusions I could make during my research process led me to create the book. This way I could get theory and practice intertwined with each other, which made the project very enjoyable for me to work on.

The effect that the writing was going to have on my graduation project also taught me more about my ways of working as a designer. I recognized the method of zooming in on something and trying to get to the core of it, as something I did often in the years before, but never really thought about it very consciously. Being taken over by the subject of nature and what all this can entail, made me look at it like seeing it for the first time and to rethink the whole subject myself as well. It made me realize how hard it can be to give a description of a word that you have known your whole life. For the participants of my survey, I could notice this difficulty as well as I could sense a lot of doubt about the definition of 'nature' in some of the reactions. Without all the reactions from the participants, I couldn't have started this project in the first place. For the further development and spreading of my research and book, I am currently working out the agenda, in the hope that I can contribute to show more about the relationship between human and nature.



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# APPENDIX

## A

Survey results on definitions of 'nature' and 'connectedness with nature'.

