

What's in a name?

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This spring, I decided I would begin to use iNaturalist and eBird, two apps I had downloaded on my smartphone. These are apps that you can use to record observations of wildlife, from lichens and fungi to birds and mammals. As the name indicates, eBird is only for birds. When you go outdoors, you bring your smartphone, and for iNaturalist, you simply take a picture of what you observe, and the location automatically saves with the image. If you are online, iNaturalist will automatically suggest what the species is you have taken a picture of, or you can manually enter the name. For eBird, you need to enter the birds observed. As I wandered around, I found the two apps almost addictive. I began to seek lichens, fungi and plants to photograph; initially, just species I knew but then any species I could find.

In the spring, I have to reacquaint myself with the songs of some birds. I will sneak toward a bird whose song I recollect but cannot remember the species to spot it with my binoculars. Once identified, I then enter the name in eBird.

It is quite impressive how accurate photo recognition works in iNaturalist. Within seconds of submitting a photograph, several pictures and suggestions pop up, and you can choose which one you think is the correct one. However, it appears that iNaturalist does not trust your identification because, in time, an expert, somewhere in the world, will check your entries. As you wander around, you can accumulate quite the list of organisms encountered. Later you upload the files, eBird to Cornell University, and iNaturalist to some site operated by National Geographic and California Academy of Sciences. You can check your list of observations accumulated over time.

During the City Challenge in late April, an event to get people excited about biodiversity, I almost became obsessed with finding species. I became competitive, I checked how many species other observers had recorded. I decided to go out again and see if I could not increase my species account to move up the ladder of the number of species observed.

The last time I was out in my woodlot with my smartphone taking pictures and listening for birds, it suddenly struck me - I had forgotten to enjoy my wandering through the fields and

woods. I had become so focused on finding new species that I forgot to experience the fields and forest as a whole ecosystem.

Usually, when I go for a walk in nature, I try to be present - let all my senses tune in to my surroundings and empty my mind of all thoughts. I find this state magical. I try to focus on the totality of nature around – on the whole ecosystem, whether a forest or a field. This way, I feel a part of my surroundings and sensing the interconnections among all the individuals. However, with my smartphone in hand, I become an outside observer and see the individuals but don't sense the whole ecosystem.

Focusing on the parts of a system rather than the whole system is typical in Western society. Why is that? Well, I believe that it is a result of unconsciously living within the mechanical world view. This world view had its origin with philosophers such as Descartes, Bacon, Locke and others starting in the sixteen hundreds when they began to promote the idea that we humans should liberate ourselves from the natural world. Nature, from the cosmos to the human body, were mere machines made up of parts, and by studying the pieces, we would understand the whole. The adoption of this world view would allow us to manipulate nature for our exclusive benefit. We have come to see nature as composed of entities or parts and thus tend to see the world as composed of resources for us to exploit.

The mechanistic world view is reflected in our language. Western languages, indeed English, are noun based. In English, we see the world as composed of parts and have names for those parts. Objects and structures are brought into existence by naming them. Languages of indigenous peoples reflects the environment within which they live, and relationship with the world around them. Indigenous languages tend to be verb-based- and thus reflect action within the environment. For example, in English, we have the verb to walk. No matter where you are walking, it is just that you walk. In some Indigenous languages, there are many words for walking, depending on where or how you walk. So there are different words for walking through a forest, up a hill, or across a field and so on. So a single word can be composed of different parts of the environment, and thus, it is natural for indigenous peoples to see the world as an interconnected whole. Therefore, language is a reflection of how we see ourselves.

We give everything names. Often, all we know about something is its name; what more do we need to know? I have taken people on field trips to talk about forest ecology, where someone will ask the name of various plants and fungi they see, or birds they hear singing. If I

know the species, I will tell them the name, and they are satisfied. I could make up any name, and some people would be content, but isn't that the irony. The name means nothing without knowing something about the species – what is its habitat, how does it reproduce, what does it eat, what is its behaviour, how does it interact with other species where it lives, and much more. If one knows that about a species, then what does it matter how it is named.

To truly understand our relationship with the natural world and our absolute dependence on it, we need to see the whole of nature and not just the parts, the species. Nature is inordinately complex, and to think that we can exploit it to our exclusive benefit is naïve. Three and a half billion years of evolution resulting in the complex interconnections among millions of species is not reducible into separate parts of a machine that we can willy-nilly tinker with.

So when I go for walks in nature, I will only bring my smartphone on occasion and take pictures or record birds and upload them to the web. Most times, I will just emerge myself in my surroundings and become a part of the intricate web of life that sustains us.