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Acting as the Planet: A Developmental Interpretation of Ecological Recovery Movements

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ABSTRACT

This article explores what is here termed Ecological Recovery Movements (ERM), an emerging set of initiatives combining environmental issues with recovery traditions inspired by the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Such initiatives have mainly been described in terms of climate grief, behavioural change, ecological concern and community support. This article argues that they may also be viewed as contexts for developmental expansion of identity. Drawing on the developmental theories of Kohlberg, Loevinger, Kegan, Torbert and Wilber, this study explores how ecological recovery, rather than merely inspiring behavioural change, may involve a broadening of self-understanding, from the individual toward increasingly inclusive forms of identification. The article suggests that these movements may be viewed as cultural laboratories, in which new interpretations of human embeddedness and ecological responsibility are explored. The idea of Acting as the Planet is presented as a developmental horizon characterising a transition from viewing oneself as a separate, independent subject acting for the environment toward experiencing oneself as a participant within interconnected living systems. The article further suggests that ecological recovery can be understood as a component of a larger cultural process, in which issues of sustainability become inextricably linked to issues of identity, meaning-making, and global wellbeing. This argument draws on perspectives from wellbeing studies, relationality research and ecological anthropology. The study also provides a foundation for future research on ecological recovery by adding a developmental perspective to an area that has primarily remained practice-oriented.

Keywords: Ecological Recovery Movements; developmental theory; climate change; environmental anthropology; identity expansion; Twelve-Step recovery; ecological spirituality; global wellbeing; relationality; Acting as the Planet

Introduction

During the last ten years or so, numerous efforts have started combining climate concern with recovery movements, such as The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). In this article, I employ the concept *Ecological Recovery Movements (ERM)* referring to these attempts to address climate issues with the help of recovery traditions.

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These movements include climate grief support groups as well as online recovery initiatives and communities of practice (Climate Sobriety, 2015; Climate Grief Group, n.d.; Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Sensus, 2026). While varying in focus and form, from emotional wellbeing to lifestyle changes and climate action, they all reframe the language of addiction and recovery in relation to the ecological crisis and wellbeing. This emerging field points to an emerging shift in the understanding of humanity's place within the living world. A shift that may be seen as an expansion of identity. In this study developmental theory is used to elucidate this expansion of identity, from the self to the planet itself, expressed in the article as *Acting as the Planet*. Although this expression is meant as a metaphor, rather than a literal psychological or metaphysical claim, it indicates an increased emphasis of our human embeddedness in the more-than-human world.

The developing field of ecological recovery movements remains predominantly practice-oriented, rather than academic. Most initiatives operate primarily through community networks, rather than within established research. However, in alignment with traditional anthropological focus on lived experiences this kind of emerging meaning-making in everyday life can be viewed as significant enough (Geertz, 1973). Similarly, scholars in other research traditions, such as lived religion also view practical experience as a source of knowledge rather than simply an expression of prior theory (Ammerman, 2021).

The new approaches are explored in many contexts, by individuals and communities, as a response to the ecological crisis. Often, the dialogue is not limited to political, scientific and technical aspects, but also includes questions around the identity and role of humanity as well as our view of the world we live in. Some of the initiatives clearly take inspiration from the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, while reinterpreting the language of recovery from addiction and relating it to unsustainable lifestyles causing environmental decline. Groups and networks engage in sharing experiences and supporting each other to shift into more sustainable ways of living. Such approaches also inspire reflection on our human relationship with nature, while collectively cultivating ecological awareness.

These initiatives can also be seen as examples of modern ecological spirituality, where new approaches to environmental challenges are formed and tested. Within these contexts it becomes clear that the current climate crisis is not only about pollution, loss of biodiversity and social fragmentation. It is also about who we are and how we view ourselves and the world. So, while these emerging networks in themselves offer valuable perspectives, they also give rise to a significant question: *What is the imagined subject, the primary actor of transformation?* This study, being mainly theoretical in nature, argues that developmental theory may provide a valuable framework for exploring this question: it examines an understanding of ecological recovery as a potential expansion of identity, instead of just a shift in behaviour. The article thus suggests that *Ecological Recovery Movements (ERM)* can be seen as cultural laboratories for expansion of identity, where new perspectives on agency, responsibility and human embeddedness are interpreted and tested in response to the climate crisis.

Despite the increasing practical interest in ecological recovery initiatives, they have rarely been analyzed from the perspective of developmental theory. Current dialogue often highlights emotional support, change in lifestyle and behaviour and climate action, while less attention is given to the underlying assumptions regarding identity and agency that influence these movements. Rather than offering original ethnographic data or contrasting particular initiatives, the article aims to contribute to this research gap, by examining how developmental theory might contribute in understanding the emerging ecological recovery movements and the forms of identity they seem to embrace.

Ecological Recovery Movements: The gap

Many initiatives to ecological recovery focus on the individual and connect to local communities or societal change brought about by responsible citizens. Although these aspects are significant, this article explores whether they should be situated within a broader framework, encompassing personal as well as social, societal and planetary levels of awareness. Ecological recovery may thus ultimately concern identity before behaviour. This perspective seems to represent a gap in the literature, as it has rarely been examined from a developmental perspective. The article will therefore explore how ecological recovery movements can illuminate and address this gap with the help of developmental theory.

Developmental theory has been described by scholars such as Kohlberg (1981), Loevinger (1976), Kegan (1982; 1994), Torbert (2004; 2005) and Wilber (2000, 2006). These scholars propose models in which human meaning-making may develop toward increasing complexity by including and transcending different levels of awareness, responsibility and identity. From a developmental perspective, ecological movements can be seen, not only as behavioural patterns, but as processes where individuals and communities develop their ability to see themselves as a larger whole.

Examples include Climate Grief Groups, modifying the recovery approach to ecological anxiety and grief; Climate Sobriety initiatives, describing unsustainable lifestyles such as consumption as a kind of addiction; and the online project *Another End of the World is Possible*, created as an ecological interpretation of the Twelve Steps tradition (*Another End of the World Is Possible*, 2022; Climate Sobriety, 2015; Climate Grief Group, n.d.) These initiatives are mentioned as examples of an emerging field, rather than being analyzed through systematic comparison. In Sweden, comparable concepts have emerged through literature, self-help circles and study groups. One example is *12 steg för planetmissbrukare* (12 Steps for Planet Abusers) aligning climate concern more strictly to recovery traditions (Sensus, 2026). Rather than comparing or evaluating particular ecological recovery movements, this article proposes a theoretical framework for understanding their developmental potential. With inspiration from developmental theory and wellbeing frameworks, the study proposes the concept of *Global Wellbeing* as a vision that encompasses interconnected dimensions of wellbeing at individual as well as social, ecological and planetary levels. (Sixtensson, 2025).

Thereby, the article proposes that ecological twelve-step movements can be interpreted as expressions of a wider cultural transformative process, and that developmental theory can fill in the gaps of expansion, so that new forms of human identity and worldview emerge in relation to the current climate challenges.

Ecological Recovery: Moving Beyond the Individual

Inspired by the programme Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, the idea of ecological recovery initiatives is to combine it with environmental concern. Most initiatives do so by using the language of addiction and recovery to handle the unsustainable lifestyles of ecological destruction. Just as we may be trapped in substance abuse and toxic behaviour, these initiatives suggest that we get stuck in different forms of ecologically harmful behaviours, such as consumerism, pollution and conflict. For this reason, the ecological recovery movements aim to adjust the twelve steps in order to support behavioural change and healing through similar processes of shared deep reflection and dialogue.

Some of the initiatives focus on climate anxiety and grief. Others are more concerned with behavioural change and climate action. However, most of them understand individual awareness as the start of ecological transformation, the process of recovery being seen as a process by which individuals learn to identify and change their thought patterns and their lifestyles.

Many initiatives focus on individual transformation, thus raising significant existential aspects connected to the climate crisis, such as grief, loss of hope or despair. In alignment with the traditional recovery movements, they involve sharing these experiences, thus supporting each other in safe contexts. This approach, however, also highlights questions about the scale and scope of the intended transformation. While individual choices contribute to the climate crisis, it is also caused by political and economic systems as well as collective worldviews. Thus, focusing merely on individual recovery runs the risk of perpetuating a kind of individualism, where collective and systemic patterns remain invisible.

From an anthropological standpoint, this becomes especially apparent when examining the issue of agency: *Who is seen as the actor in the process of ecological transformation?* Within many of the climate-based recovery models, the individual remains the primary subject, even if the focus can also embrace close relationships and local networks. Although these dimensions are crucial for any healing process, there is a remaining presumption that all transformation is something mainly connected to individual initiatives. This presumption mirrors more general trends in contemporary Western society, where individual autonomy is often seen as the foundation for social change.

At the same time, there are many facts that challenge this tendency. There is an increasing awareness of a complexity that operates across scales and beyond individual experiences or local action in the form of political and cultural patterns, biodiversity and global economic structures. Therefore, the current ecological crisis calls for a re-evaluation, not merely of personal behaviour, but also of the forms of identity that define and drive responsibility.

The following chart may describe the emerging field and the different approaches to agency and emphasis. To illustrate this theoretical discussion, the study also draws on another initiative within this emerging field, 12 Steg till globalt välbefinnande (*12 Steps to global wellbeing*). Although initiated in Sweden, the programme has been developed with collaborators in several countries and is intended as globally applicable framework (Sixtensson, 2025).

Initiative	Primary emphasis	Primary agent of transformation
Climate Grief Groups	Climate grief, emotional resilience	Individual in community
Climate Sobriety	Behavioural change	Individual lifestyle
<i>12 Steps for Planet Abusers (Sweden)</i>	Ecological responsibility	Individual and society
<i>12 Steps to Global Wellbeing (Global)</i>	Developmental expansion of identity	Planet, (eco-)systems, living systems

Ecological recovery, then, seems to point toward an expansion beyond the individual. Rather than merely trying to involve more people in personal ecological recovery,

the movement suggests that it is important to also examine systems and societies as agents of change. While including and affirming the individual level, an additional vertical approach can be interpreted as more inclusive understandings of identity and responsibility, involving more than behavioural change. This kind of shift would require a completely different understanding of identity.

From this perspective, ecological recovery can be understood as a contributing component in a developmental process aiming to increasingly widen the view of identity. Rather than just acting as a responsible individual citizen or local community, the idea is to deepen our understanding of consciousness in such a way that it can interact and co-exist with the wellbeing of complex living systems as a whole. This potential is among the possibilities within developmental theory and therefore the main subject of this article. If ecological crises operate across interconnected living systems, ecological recovery may likewise require a corresponding expansion of identity. Yet, this developmental dimension has received limited scholarly attention. The following section therefore examines how developmental theory may be a fruitful lens for understanding this kind of expansion.

Developmental Theory: Expanding Identity

Developmental theory provides one possible framework for understanding how ecological identity may expand beyond the individual. Several developmental theorists, although representing diverse intellectual traditions, share a view of human maturity as a gradual expansion of identity, meaning making and scope of responsibility. Here, Ingold's critique of the nature-culture divide and his understanding of life as a meshwork of relations may be seen as an anthropological parallel to the developmental expansion discussed in this study (Ingold 2000; 2011).

Lawrence Kohlberg, one of the earlier scholars in the field of developmental theory, described moral development as a process from self-interest and conformity toward more and more universal ethical mindsets including an increasing ability to embrace the wellbeing of broader and more complex aspects of society, as well as all sentient beings as a whole, instead of focusing merely on the interests of one individual or group at a time. Similarly, Jane Loevinger argues that human growth means increasing the capacity to include more complexity and integrate many different perspectives simultaneously. Maturity leads to relying less on established views of one's self and roles, while gradually including more ambiguity, interdependence and systemic views of reality.

Robert Kegan has further evolved these ideas, by describing adult development as a process of meaning-making and constructing reality in more and more complex ways. A significant aspect of Kegan's contribution is his distinction between a self-authoring mind and a self-transforming mind. The capability of the former individual centres around forming coherent values and goals, while the latter can perceive how every worldview is partial and integrated within wider systems. This ability to embrace multiple viewpoints at the same time becomes particularly relevant in relation to the ecological crisis that transcends many levels of reality as well as national, cultural and disciplinary horizons. William R. Torbert contributes to the field of developmental theory by a more action-oriented approach. His model of action logic shows how individuals as well as communities gradually develop more refined ways of engaging with complexity. One of Torbert's concepts is especially interesting: that of the Alchemist, referring to the capability to address personal, organisational and societal transformation simultaneously. This action logic is undoubtedly relevant for leaders and agents within ecological recovery movements, where sustainable lifestyles and initiatives may embrace a genuinely systemic understanding of transformation.

Another approach to developmental theory is offered by Ken Wilber. In his model AQAL (All Quadrants, All Levels), he argues that human development simultaneously moves through multiple dimensions: individual, cultural, behavioural and systemic. This *Integral Theory* suggests that all these four aspects need attention in order for the context to reach the next level. It is not sufficient to develop one or two dimensions. Transformation requires concern for all four Quadrants. All these developmental theorists, although different in some ways, agree on the idea of gradual expansion of identity and worldview. While not rejecting the former stages, every new step will include and transcend the former. The field of developmental theory offers a significant possibility, allowing identity and responsibility to expand beyond the individual as well as community and society, thus leaning into identifying with larger living systems and even the planet as a whole.

For many environmental scholars such as Vandana Shiva, this would relate to their idea of human wellbeing being intertwined with ecological wellbeing. In a similar way, this interconnectedness of multiple dimensions of wellbeing is mirrored by the deeper principles of the *Gross National Happiness* model (GNH), a more inclusive alternative to Gross National Product, GDP (Ura 2012; 2017; Rosengren, 2016), especially in the adapted form that is scalable for personal as well as for organisational, societal and national levels (Sixtensson 2025). All these approaches suggest that ecological transformation needs to go beyond personal and behavioural change, developing forms of consciousness that embrace gradually more complex systems of coexistence, making ecological engagement not merely a question of ethical responsibility, but of identity.

This article primarily focuses on how the ecological twelve step movements can be interpreted as contributing to this form of development. Some initiatives mainly support individuals in handling climate anxiety and lifestyle changes, others focus more on collective social engagement. Developmental theory posits that identity can progressively expand to encompass more inclusive forms of consciousness. This creates the opportunity for what this article metaphorically calls *Acting as the Planet*.

Acting as the Planet: A Developmental Horizon

This article suggests *Acting as the Planet* as a potential developmental horizon. If developmental theory outlines expanding types of identity, how could this expansion be understood in the context of ecological recovery?

Ecological recovery movements can, according to the former sections, be seen as an example of expanding the traditional frameworks of recovery and climate action, thereby extending the interpretation of addiction from personal to global self-harm. Still, there are many ecological recovery initiatives that view the individual as the primary subject of transformation.

Rather than focusing merely on individual development, the aim here is to examine whether we also learn to identify with larger contexts. For this purpose the developmental theories are helpful. Although different in approach, they share a similar idea of a human development that may be called *vertical*, i.e. a deeper and/or higher form of maturity that is increasingly expanding identity and capability to handle complexity. Development means to them moving from self-interest toward concern for and identification with larger wholes. Ecological awareness can thus be viewed not merely as ethical concern for the more-than-human world, but as an intimate embeddedness within it. From an anthropological perspective, Ingold (2000; 2011) and Kohn (2013) both highlight that humans are not external to nature. Instead, meaning, life and agency emerge through continuous networks of relationships between humans and the more-than-human world. Similar thoughts are emphasised by scholars in various other fields, such as phenomenology, ontology, ecology and ecotheology (Abram, 1996; 2010; Kimmerer, 2013; Shiva, 1988; 2005; Rowe, 2024). Rather

than harm being inflicted against something external to ourselves, ecological destruction will consequently be experienced as something internal, occurring within a larger living system in which we are included. We hurt ourselves when we hurt each other and nature.

A shift of this kind seems to be helpful for the ecological movement in general and for the recovery-based initiatives in particular. As an example among the developmental theorists, Ken Wilber's integral model (AQAL) offers tools and terms for identifying this transformation from egocentric to ethnocentric, world centric and potentially even cosmocentric levels of awareness, increasingly moving toward more inclusive understandings of identity and concern. Already the world centric level embraces responsibility for society, leaning toward concern for humanity as a whole. However, the climate crisis calls for further development thus including the more-than-human world as well as future generations. This suggests the possibility of more expansive forms of identification, such as a *planetary*, or even *cosmocentric*, perspective, involving the capacity to see oneself as a part of a much greater process of life.

Not only developmental psychology supports this idea of widening scope of identification, but also systems theorists have highlighted the significance of understanding the interdependence of society and ecosystems. In many indigenous traditions, documented by scholars such as Kimmerer, this human embeddedness in nature is being expressed as a network of relatives rather than a hierarchical understanding of human stewardship over the rest of the living world (Kimmerer, 2013). Vandana Shiva is yet another scholar emphasizing this interdependence and interrelatedness (Shiva, 1988; 2005).

It is from this understanding of deep interrelatedness that the notion of *Acting as the Planet* emerges. Contrary to approaches focusing mainly on individual recovery and wellbeing, this metaphor is based on this kind of multi-layered interconnectedness involving individuals, societies, nature and the Earth as a whole - what this article refers to as *Global wellbeing*. Wellbeing, from this perspective, is not merely something for individuals, but emerges from within recovering relations between interrelated living systems. This means that personal wellbeing is fundamentally intertwined with social and ecological wellbeing. This process of transforming worldviews and identity also helps explain why ecological crises raise deep existential questions. It is natural that questions about identity, meaning and purpose arise when we get in touch with the boundaries of our worldviews and self-concept. The developmental process thus leads us beyond political and behavioural change into a profound existential dimension: it is about who we ultimately are.

From this perspective, the ecological twelve-step movements may be interpreted as something much more than recovery groups or climate activism. Depending on their approach, they can be seen as communities of practice or cultural laboratories where new forms of identity and worldviews are tested. The focus is gradually shifting from individuals saving the planet toward a natural participation in the wellbeing of all living systems. In this regard the developmental concept of evolving identity overlaps with anthropological discussions of relationality, where humans are viewed as emerging through continuous relationships with each other as well as with the more-than-human realms (Ingold, 2000; 2011; Kohn, 2013).

Rather than asking how human beings may save the planet, ecological recovery may in alignment with this, ultimately invite the question: how might we learn to act as the planet - and what would it mean?

Toward an Integral Ecology of Recovery

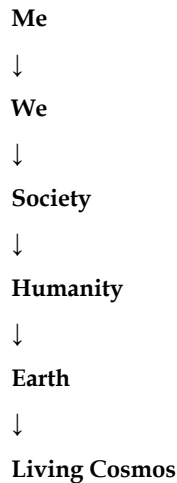
As the previous sections have suggested, the emerging ecological recovery movements can be viewed as responses to the contemporary climate crisis in terms of developmental theory. Instead of seeing the different efforts as opposing strategies, this article proposes that they may be understood as complementary expressions of an emerging ecology of recovery, contributing with different approaches to and levels of transformation. Some focus more on personal growth, others involve social and systemic dimensions, while a few initiatives lean toward embracing more complex stages connected to an expanded identification and global wellbeing.

Promoting developmental expansion does not imply dismissing earlier stages as wrong or unnecessary. Individual maturity remains significant as a foundation for expansion of identity through ecological recovery. The developmental process is not about excluding, but instead including and transcending, by placing previous levels on a larger map of natural systems. Here I call this kind of expanding awareness *vertical* development, i.e. an increasingly deepening understanding, including multiple dimensions and levels of reality.

One example of this vertical development is the ecological recovery programme 12 Steps to Global Wellbeing (Sixtensson, 2025). Based on adapted steps from the traditional recovery programme in combination with developmental theory and a scalable version of Gross National Happiness (Rosengren, 2020; Sixtensson, 2025; Ura, 2012), this programme is a method for expanding identification toward being part of larger wholes. Rather than being a subject of empirical assessment, the programme serves here as an example of how perspectives focused on development and wellbeing can be incorporated within an ecological recovery framework. The larger map of vertical development can be described by this model:

Developmental Horizon	Primary Identity	Main Concern	Primary Ecological Response
Personal Recovery	Individual self	Healing personal suffering	Lifestyle change
Relational Recovery	Family, group, community	Mutual support and belonging	Collective action
Social Recovery	Society and institutions	Justice and systemic reform	Social transformation
Planetary Recovery	Humanity and Earth systems	Ecological sustainability	Planetary stewardship
Global Wellbeing	Interconnected living systems	Flourishing of whole systems	<i>Acting as the Planet</i>

Another model for illustrating the vertical development may move from caring for *me* to including concern for and identification with a broader *we*, *society*, *humanity*, *Earth* and finally *Living Cosmos*.



This simple chart and model should not be understood as a complete or rigid theory, but rather as an outline for illustrating how ecological responsibility and identity become gradually more expanded and inclusive. It is also not meant to imply that all of this is realistically possible to experience here and now. However, it is a direction, a vision and a horizon. The final horizon of ecological responses, here expressed as Acting as the Planet, is meant to describe embracing the full complexity of contemporary global wellbeing challenges. Instead of understanding humanity as external masters with stewardship over nature, this approach involves being identified with and participating in larger living systems of wellbeing. The kind of shift required for this kind of consciousness and agency is not only based on influencing political institutions or technical innovation, but also involves many other arenas, such as rewriting cultural and existential narratives, self-images and worldviews.

From this horizon, contemporary ecological twelve-step movements may be interpreted as continuously ongoing workshops or communities of practice for an emerging culture of global wellbeing. Their contribution is not merely about advocating sustainable lifestyles and individual transformation, but about cultivating new ways of understanding what it means to be human in a world of interconnected relations. A future challenge could be creating integral frameworks for vertical development and all-inclusive maps, rather than choosing between competing ecological models and approaches. A maturing ecological recovery perspective would seek to attain this very kind of integration, where personal transformation is honoured, while at the same time opening for expanding the horizon toward social and planetary wellbeing.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to explore how contemporary ecological recovery initiatives may be interpreted and expanded through the lens of developmental theory. Although this article does not suggest that developmental theory is the only possible interpretation of these movements, it has opened for dialogue around this perspective. This is not to imply that all ecological recovery movements follow the same developmental pattern, but rather to suggest developmental theory as one possible analytical lens for interpreting emerging aspects of this field.

The emerging ecological recovery movements thus seem to reflect an increasing insight that climate crises must not be reduced to merely political or technical challenges. They also call for inquiries of identity, meaning-making and developmental expansion. By means of adapting the language and basic principles of traditional twelve-step programmes to

ecological concerns, these movements contribute with spaces for new lifestyles, mutual support and dialogue, but also for testing new patterns for identity and emerging worldviews. At the same time, the article has argued that many ecological recovery approaches continue to operate within an implicit framework in which the individual remains the primary subject of transformation. While such approaches are both valuable and necessary, developmental theories suggest the possibility of a further expansion of identity and concern.

Drawing on the work of Loevinger, Kegan, Torbert, Kohlberg and Wilber, the article proposes that ecological engagement can be understood as part of a broader developmental movement toward increasingly inclusive forms of awareness. Ecological responsibility, from this perspective, is not just about adopting sustainable behaviours or influencing society, but about cultivating a capacity to identify with larger systems of life. The notion of *Acting as the Planet* has been mentioned as a possible horizon for the increasing inclusiveness, based on global wellbeing, that in this article refers to the flourishing of multiple interconnected dimensions simultaneously: personal and societal as well as ecosystems and the planet as a whole. From this perspective, *acting as the Planet*, serves as a metaphor for an expanded consciousness embracing not only the individual as a separate agent within ecological systems, but as an intertwined participant in the larger living systems. This means placing personal agency within a wider interrelational and ecological context, rather than dismissing any level.

The ideas, models and concepts put forth in this article should not be understood as a rigid framework or as a comprehensive developmental theory of ecological recovery movements - nor as a critique of any such endeavor. The aim is merely to provide a tentative line of reasoning and an opening for dialogue regarding the significance and function of developmental expansion in a context of ecological recovery movements. In facing the ongoing ecological crises, we are continuously challenged to question inherited assumptions about humanity's place in the world, while new cultural, spiritual and developmental narratives and practices emerge.

Ecological recovery movements can be a significant area for testing these emerging phenomena. Future studies may look more closely at how the various ecological recovery strategies support a development of interdependent agency and global wellbeing. From this perspective, the ecological recovery movements serve as both responses to climate crises and as experimental spaces where new forms of identity and agency can develop. Ultimately, the question is not only how individuals can save the planet, but how humans may learn to recognize themselves as participants in the living systems they seek to protect.

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