

Lucas Foglia: Human Nature

The relationship between humans and nature is both symbiotic and fraught. In the era of climate change, scientists and conservationists are scrambling to find solutions to complex challenges such as resource depletion, ecosystem transformation, overpopulation, and species extinction. As our destruction of the natural world becomes more pervasive, our interactions with wilderness are in turn becoming increasingly restrained. Our experiences with nature, in fact, often occur in human-made environments. And yet, as we spend more time than ever indoors, social science research indicates that a connection to nature is vital to human wellbeing.

Conservationists are sometimes at odds about how humankind would be best served moving forward. Traditional thinking has often prioritized nature preservation over all else. Yet even the 6.2 million square miles of land that are protected worldwide are losing species and showing other irreversible effects of global warming.¹ Lately, more radical conservationists have proposed a model that focuses on supporting cities with resources that have a greater efficiency of production—such as nuclear power and sustainable models of industrialized agriculture—so that humans and nature can co-prosper and the countryside might re-wild itself.² Already as things stand, if cities with their stacked living didn't exist, and the world's population lived side by side in small single-family homes, we would need at least four times the amount of land available on Earth to satisfy our resource demands.³

Lucas Foglia (American, b. 1983) is interested in such complexities, particularly in challenging the notion that people and nature are in opposition. He began his project *Human Nature* (2006–16) in order to probe our relationship to the wilderness, and to explore our fundamental need to commune with nature. With the skills of a seasoned photographer, and often with a

¹ Gayathri Vaidyanathan, "Can Humans and Nature Coexist?" November 10, 2014. Reprinted from "Climatewire" on Scientific American website, www.scientificamerican.com.

² Ibid.

³ Gaia Vince, "Why We Need to Bring Nature Back Into Cities," May 30, 2013, www.bbc.com.

touch of humor, he documents both the mystery of nature and our reverence for it, as seen in pictures of leisure activities and exploration in remote locations. A man swings naked between trees like Tarzan. A woman bathes in mud, mouth agape as if in ecstasy. A pair of researchers battle a dense blizzard to sample air on a mountaintop in Colorado. Foglia demonstrates our dependence on the wild for survival by depicting people making their livings off the land—and working in its service. A photographer rents a drought-ridden farm to use as a backdrop for a racy fashion shoot. Three children stand nonchalantly in front of a cattle herd. Men and women fell trees and conduct controlled burns. Foglia's numerous illustrations of preservation efforts and images of children serve as optimistic nods to the future.

Foglia became even more absorbed in the topic of nature after Hurricane Sandy damaged his childhood home—a farm on Long Island, New York—in 2012. Upon hearing a news report that attributed the severe weather to climate change, he realized that there is no longer any spot on Earth that has been untouched by human activity. The air itself has been transformed, meaning that every living plant and animal has been affected.

Foglia was curious to see what the science behind climate change looks like. He started to visit scientists working for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, who monitor greenhouse gases and maintain an expansive record of global air quality. A trip to the Juneau Icefield Research Program in Alaska resulted in photographs of scientists sampling ice from a glacier that is expected to disappear by 2200. Other locations Foglia documented are preparing for the consequences of accelerated global warming, such as the greenhouse at the New York State Agriculture Experiment Station, which is developing new crop varieties intended to withstand the extreme weather conditions of the future.

The stories Foglia tells are not all grim. Spurred on by neuroscience research that shows that human beings benefit intellectually, emotionally, and physically when exposed to nature, Foglia sought out scientists such as Dr. David Strayer of the University of Utah, who monitors his subjects' brain waves as they sit in front of natural landscapes to see if nature improves attention span. In Sweden, based on indications that time spent in nature may help humans

ease negative stresses and depression,⁴ a subject wears 3D glasses in a study aimed at discerning whether simulated nature can have equally beneficial effects.

Foglia traveled to the city-state of Singapore, where 100 percent of the population is urban. The government actively promotes incentives for vertical gardens and green buildings. These efforts have made Singapore a model for sustainable urban development. Over the past fifty years the once overcrowded city with open sewers and extensive slums has been transformed into one of the cleanest cities in the world with a network of green spaces connected by aerial walkways. Even the airport has a nature walk.

Foglia also visited Rikers Island, New York City's main jail complex and the largest penal colony in the world, to photograph their innovative GreenHouse project, in which inmates grow flowers, fruits, and vegetables. The participants learn teamwork and also receive a horticultural certificate that might aid in finding employment after prison. Other benefits of the program are harder to quantify, but the GreenHouse staff believe that asking the participants to gently care for fragile, living things may ultimately help those inmates thrive.⁵

Throughout all of these locations, Foglia's images celebrate and probe our synergetic relationship with the natural world. Ultimately his photographs invite us to ponder our inherently animal nature, and to understand our fundamental connection to the earth for health and happiness. As Foglia recommends, "Go outside. It's good for you."⁶

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⁴ Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2008), 35.

⁵ Melia Robinson, "The Vegetable Gardens On Rikers Island Are Surprisingly Robust," *Business Insider*, January 28, 2015, www.businessinsider.com.

⁶ Lucas Foglia, interview by Ruby Boddington, "'Go outside, it's good for you': Lucas Foglia's Breathtaking and Challenging Series Human Nature," Thursday, April 5, 2018, www.itsnicethat.com.