

Enviro Lenses

There are so many ways to examine the relationship between humans and the natural world. We've collected some of our favorite approaches to serve as models. Each of the excerpts in this resource shows a different form of humans shaping or being shaped by their environment, and writers writing about it.

The Memoirist

Helen Macdonald: *H is for Hawk*

Forty-five minutes north-east of Cambridge is a landscape I've come to love very much indeed. It's where wet fen gives way to parched sand. It's a land of twisted pine trees, burned-out cars, shotgun-peppered road signs and US Air Force bases. There are ghosts here: houses crumble inside numbered blocks of pine forestry. There are spaces built for air-delivered nukes inside grassy tumuli behind twelve-foot fences, tattoo parlours and US Air Force golf courses. In spring it's a riot of noise: constant plane traffic, gas-guns over pea fields, wood-larks and jet engines. It's called the Brecklands – the broken lands – and it's where I ended up that morning, seven years ago, in early spring, on a trip I hadn't planned at all. At five in the morning I'd been staring at a square of streetlight on the ceiling, listening to a couple of late party-leavers chatting on the pavement outside. I felt odd: overtired, overwrought, unpleasantly like my brain had been removed and my skull stuffed with something like microwaved aluminium foil, dented, charred and shorting with sparks. Nnngh. Must get out, I thought, throwing back the covers. Out! I pulled on jeans, boots and a jumper, scalded my mouth with burned coffee, and it was only when my frozen, ancient Volkswagen and I were halfway down the A14 that I worked out where I was going, and why. Out there, beyond the foggy windscreen and white lines, was the forest. The broken forest. That's where I was headed. To see goshawks.

[Find a copy of this book at your [local library](#).]

The Reporter

Ayesha Shakya: "High and dry in Nepal"

Tucked behind towering cliffs and deep canyons, in a remote corner of Upper Mustang, Samzong appears abandoned from a distance. Houses look deserted and farms look dry. The river alongside the village has been reduced to a trickle.

Enter the village, and it is clear why: there is simply no water. People line up at the village's only tap, carrying their empty buckets.

"This is the only water tap working here. The other one went dry a few days ago so everyone has to come here instead," says Nima Gurung.

In a trans-Himalayan region that receives less than 200mm of rain a year, erratic rain and snowfall have led to a deepening water crisis.

"The rain never arrives on time anymore. When it rains, it rains extremely heavily for a short period but it is not enough to sustain the village," says Topke Gurung, one of the village chiefs.

The level of water in the river is largely dependent on the amount of winter snowfall which also varies every year. When the rains do come, they fall in huge torrents that trigger landslides on the barren slopes.

As a result, they wash away channels that bring irrigation water into the village, leading to a decrease in the productivity of farmlands.

[This story can be read in full [here](#).]

The Lyricist

Gretel Ehrlich: *The Solace of Open Spaces*

It's May and I've just awakened from a nap, curled against sagebrush the way my dog taught me to sleep—sheltered from the wind. A front is pulling the huge sky over me, and from the dark a hailstone has hit me on the head. I'm trailing a band of two thousand sheep across a stretch of Wyoming badlands, a fifty-mile trip that takes five days because sheep shade up in hot sun and won't budge until it's cool. Bunched together now, and excited into a run by the storm, they drift across dry land, tumbling into draws like water and surge out again onto the rugged, choppy plateaus that are the building blocks of this state.

[Find a copy of this book at your [local library](#).]

Memory Keeper

M. Scott Momaday

The journey began one day long ago on the edge of the northern Plains. It was carried on over a course of many generations and many hundreds of miles. In the end there were many things to remember, to dwell upon and talk about.

"You know, everything had to begin. . . ." For the Kiowas the beginning was a struggle for existence in the bleak northern mountains. It was there, they say, that they entered the world through a hollow log. The end, too, was a struggle, and it was lost. The young Plains culture of the Kiowas withered and died like grass that is burned in the prairie wind. There came a day like destiny; in every direction, as far as the eye could see, carrion lay out in the land. The buffalo was the animal representation of the sun, the essential and sacrificial victim of the Sun Dance. When the wild herds were destroyed, so too was the will of the Kiowa people; there was nothing to sustain them in spirit. But these are idle recollections, the mean and ordinary agonies of human history. The interim was a time of great adventure and nobility and fulfillment. Tai-me came to the Kiowas in a vision born of suffering and despair. "Take me with you," Tai-me said, "and I will give you whatever you want." And it was so. The great adventure of the Kiowas was a going forth into the heart of the continent. They began a long migration from the headwaters of the Yellowstone River eastward to the Black Hills and south to the Wichita Mountains. Along the way they acquired horses, the religion of the Plains, a love and possession of the open land. Their nomadic soul was set free. In alliance with the Comanches they held dominion in the southern Plains for a hundred years. In the course of that long migration they had come of age as a people. They had conceived a good idea of themselves; they had dared to imagine and determine who they were.

[Find a copy of this book at your [local library](#).]

The Harbinger

Kathryn Shulz: "The Big One"

Those who cannot get out of the inundation zone under their own power will quickly be overtaken by a greater one. A grown man is knocked over by ankle-deep water moving at 6.7 miles an hour. The tsunami will be moving more than twice that fast when it arrives. Its height will vary with the contours of the coast, from twenty feet to more than a hundred feet. It will not look like a Hokusai-style wave, rising up from the surface of the sea and breaking from above. It will look like the whole ocean, elevated, overtaking land. Nor will it be made only of water—not once it reaches the

shore. It will be a five-story deluge of pickup trucks and doorframes and cinder blocks and fishing boats and utility poles and everything else that once constituted the coastal towns of the Pacific Northwest.

[This story can be read in full [here](#).]

The Historian

Tim Flannery: *The Future Eaters*

The Aboriginal people who occupied Tasmania, Kangaroo Island and the islands of Bass Strait, represent one extreme in the process of the land shaping a people. Beginning about 12,000 years ago they found themselves cut off by rising sea-levels. Because they lacked a seaworthy vessels they were completely isolated. Their story is a most extraordinary one, for the relatively small size of their island homes drove their evolution in a particular, inexorable and fateful direction.

[Find a copy of this book at your [local library](#).]

The Critic

Bill McKibben: “Obama and Climate Change: The Real Story”

Two years ago, on a gorgeous November day, 12,000 activists surrounded the White House to protest the proposed Keystone XL pipeline. Signs we carried featured quotes from Barack Obama in 2008: "Time to end the tyranny of oil"; "In my administration, the rise of the oceans will begin to slow."

Our hope was that we could inspire him to keep those promises. Even then, there were plenty of cynics who said Obama and his insiders were too closely tied to the fossil-fuel industry to take climate change seriously. But in the two years since, it's looked more and more like they were right – that in our hope for action we were willing ourselves to overlook the black-and-white proof of how he really feels.

[This story can be read in full [here](#).]

The Teacher

Thich Nhat Hanh: *Love Letter to the Earth*

At this very moment, the Earth is above you, below you, all around you, and even inside you. The Earth is everywhere. You may be used to think of the Earth as only the ground beneath your feet. But the water, the sky, and everything around us comes from the Earth. We often forget that the planet we are living on has given us all the elements that make up our bodies. The water in our flesh, our bones, and all the microscopic cells inside our bodies all come from the Earth and are part of the Earth. The Earth is not just the environment we live in. We are the Earth and we are always carrying her within us.

[Find a copy of this book at your [local library](#).]

The Profiler

Elizabeth Kolbert: “The Island in the Wind”

JØRGEN TRANBERG IS a farmer who lives on the Danish island of Samsø. He is a beefy man with a mop of brown hair and an unpredictable sense of humor. When I arrived at his house, one

gray morning this spring, he was sitting in his kitchen, smoking a cigarette and watching grainy images on a black-and-white TV. The images turned out to be closed-circuit shots from his barn. One of his cows, he told me, was about to give birth, and he was keeping an eye on her. We talked for a few minutes, and then, laughing, he asked me if I wanted to climb his wind turbine. I was pretty sure I didn't, but I said yes anyway.

[This story can be read in full [here](#).]

The Witness

Terry Tempest Williams: Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place

"Last night, I spoke at one of the Circle Meetings of the Baptist Church. Afterward, a Kenyan friend, Wangari Waigwa-Stone, and I spoke about darkness and stars. "I was raised under an African sky," she said. "Darkness was never something I was afraid of. The clarity, definition, and profusion of stars became maps as to how one navigates at night. I always knew where I was simply by looking up." She paused. "My sons do not have these guides. They have no relationship to darkness, nothing in their imagination tells them there are pathways in the night they can move through." "I have a Norwegian friend who says, 'City lights are a conspiracy against higher thought,'" I added. "Indeed," Wangari said, smiling, her rich, deep voice resonating. "I am Kikuyu. My people believe if you are close to the Earth, you are close to people." "How so?" I asked. "What an African woman nurtures in the soil will eventually feed her family. Likewise, what she nurtures in her relations will ultimately nurture her community. It is a matter of living the circle. "Because we have forgotten our kinship with the land," she continued, "our kinship with each other has become pale. We shy away from accountability and involvement. We choose to be occupied, which is quite different from being engaged. In America, time is money. In Kenya, time is relationship. We look at investments differently."

[Find a copy of this book at your [local library](#).]

The Spiritualist

Wendell Berry: What Are People For

"For many years, my walks have taken me down an old fencerow in a wooded hollow on what was once my grandfather's farm. A battered galvanized bucket is hanging on a fence post near the head of the hollow, and I never go by it without stopping to look inside. For what is going on in that bucket is the most momentous thing I know, the greatest miracle that I have ever heard of: it is making earth. The old bucket has hung there through many autumns, and the leaves have fallen around it and some have fallen into it. Rain and snow have fallen into it, and the fallen leaves have held the moisture and so have rotted. Nuts have fallen into it, or been carried into it by squirrels; mice and squirrels have eaten the meat of the nuts and left the shells; they and other animals have left their droppings; insects have flown into the bucket and died and decayed; birds have scratched in it and left their droppings or perhaps a feather or two. This slow work of growth and death, gravity and decay, which is the chief work of the world, has by now produced in the bottom of the bucket several inches of black humus. I look into that bucket with fascination because I am a farmer of sorts and an artist of sorts, and I recognize there an artistry and a farming far superior to mine, or to that of any human. I have seen the same process at work on the tops of boulders in a forest, and it has been at work immemorially over most of the land surface of the world. All creatures die into it, and they live by it."

[Find a copy of this book at your [local library](#).]

The Philosophizer
Jonathan Safran Foer: *Eating Animals*

The typical cage for egg-laying hens allows each sixty-seven square inches of floor space — somewhere between the size of this page and a sheet of printer paper. Such cages are stacked between three and nine tiers high — Japan has the world's highest battery cage unit, with cages stacked eighteen tiers high — in windowless sheds.

Step your mind into a crowded elevator, an elevator so crowded you cannot turn around without bumping into (and aggravating) your neighbor. The elevator is so crowded you are often held aloft.

This is a kind of blessing, as the slanted floor is made of wire, which cuts into your feet. After some time, those in the elevator will lose their ability to work in the interest of the group. Some will become violent; others will go mad. A few, deprived of food and hope, will become cannibalistic.

There is no respite, no relief. No elevator repairman is coming. The doors will open once, at the end of your life, for your journey to the only place worse...

Not only the willful causing of unnecessary suffering, but the indifference to it. It's much easier to be cruel than one might think. It's often said that nature, "red in tooth and claw," is cruel. I heard this again and again from ranchers, who tried to persuade me that they were protecting their animals from what lay outside the enclosures. Nature is no picnic, true. (Picnics are rarely picnics.)

And it's also true that animals on the very best farms often have better lives than they would in the wild. But nature isn't cruel. And neither are the animals in nature that kill and occasionally even torture one another. Cruelty depends on an understanding of cruelty, and the ability to choose against it. Or to choose to ignore it.

[Find a copy of this book at your [local library](#).]

The Exhorter
Michael Pollen: "The Farmer in Chief"

Dear Mr. President-Elect,

It may surprise you to learn that among the issues that will occupy much of your time in the coming years is one you barely mentioned during the campaign: food. Food policy is not something American presidents have had to give much thought to, at least since the Nixon administration — the last time high food prices presented a serious political peril. Since then, federal policies to promote maximum production of the commodity crops (corn, soybeans, wheat and rice) from which most of our supermarket foods are derived have succeeded impressively in keeping prices low and food more or less off the national political agenda. But with a suddenness that has taken us all by surprise, the era of cheap and abundant food appears to be drawing to a close. What this means is that you, like so many other leaders through history, will find yourself confronting the fact — so easy to overlook these past few years — that the health of a nation's food system is a critical issue of national security. Food is about to demand your attention.

[This story can be read in full [here](#).]