

Abstract

Sustainability Science investigates how Social-Ecological Systems can be understood and managed to respond to pressing environmental and social challenges from local to global scales. The relationship of humans with nature is at the heart of those systems and, therefore, is increasingly recognized as an important leverage point. However, literature about the Human-Nature Relationship (HNR) is fragmented and rare when it comes to its role in Sustainability Education. Hence, the aim of this study is to identify the prevalence of the HNR in higher education programs related to Sustainability.

Different perceptions of nature and HNR concepts, identified through literature research, were searched for in 24 module handbooks in Sustainability related programs. From the same 24 universities in Germany, 957 students and graduates participated in an online survey about their perception of nature, knowledge about HNR concepts, and opinion about the importance of the HNR. In addition, the HNR of participants was measured with the Inclusion of Self (INS) and the short version of the Nature Relatedness scale.

In both, module handbooks and survey, HNR concepts were not widely distributed. Even though participants emphasize that it is important to think and talk about HNR to foster behaviour change in individuals and society, there is no common framework to identify different relationships of humans to nature. In addition, different perceptions of nature among participants highlight the ambiguity of the term nature. Furthermore, the results of the INS and NR demonstrate that people with environmental knowledge and an interest in protecting nature have a higher connectedness to nature.

The results highlight that the HNR is missing in Sustainability Education in the form of HNR concepts and awareness of different perspectives on nature. The study suggests that it is worthy of investigating further how the relationship between humans and nature can be integrated in education and promoted in societal discourse.