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Research in Graubünden

Why nature is important to us

What are the values on which our relationship with nature is based?



In the Lower Engadine and Val Müstair, farmers maintain a close relationship with nature.

Photo: Mollie Chapman

In Graubünden, nature is omnipresent. The environmental social scientist Mollie Chapman and the environmental ethicist Anna Deplazes Zemp research the relationship between humans and nature. It is therefore not surprising that the scientists from the University of Zurich chose the Lower Engadine and Val Müstair for their research project. In 2019, Chapman conducted interviews in the two Grisons mountain valleys with 32 farmers who make their living from livestock farming and are thus closely connected to their environment. Contacts were arranged by local project partner Angelika Abderhalden of UNESCO Biosfera Engiadina Val Müstair and regional agricultural advisors.

Chapman explains what is special about the study (see box), the results of which were published in November 2022: "It is usually assumed that people are interested in nature because it is useful to them. One then speaks of instrumental value, for example, 'This tree provides shade, so it is valuable.' Or one speaks of intrinsic value - something is valuable for its own sake. Many people would say that animals have value for their own sake. But intrinsic and instrumental values describe only part of the way we humans value nature. This is because, for most people, the reasons they care about nature are the personal relationships they have with

it. For example, they may care about the forest that was behind their house when they were growing up. These reasons for caring about nature are called 'relational values'."

But what exactly are 'relational values' and how do they work in practice? The researchers have developed a theoretical model of 'relational values' specifically for this purpose. In their study, they show how this new model works using the example of Graubünden farmers. On the basis of interviews with the farmers, they were able to delineate three areas that make 'relational values' tangible. Chapman explains, "The first two relate to relationships with animals, first with farm animals and second with hunted wildlife. The third broad category of identified 'relational values' is referred to as 'farming in place'. This category includes the various ways in which respondents described their responsibilities as farmers in an alpine mountain region."

An important feature of 'relational values' is that they are two-way and interdependent, Chapman points out, "For example, farmers stated that it was important to them to take good care of their livestock, such as cows, sheep or horses. They explained how important it was to take care of their animals to make sure they were healthy. In turn, they felt pleasure in their relationship with their animals, knowing that the animals trusted them. We believe that it is this reciprocal relationship or 'give and take' that characterizes relational values and their underlying relationships. This is true not only for farmers, but for many people."

Mollie Chapman and Daniela Heinen

More information

The Graubünden Parks Association coordinates joint activities and promotes the concerns of the Graubünden parks (including UNESCO Biosfera Engiadina Val Müstair). The association is a partner in the scientific network of Academia Raetica.

The study by Mollie Chapman and Anna Deplazes Zemp is available here: Chapman, M., & Deplazes Zemp, A. (2022). 'I owe it to the animals': the bidirectionality of Swiss mountain farmers' relational values. *Man and Nature*, 00, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10415>



Mollie Chapman

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