

The Moral Lives of Symbolic Mothers: How Anthropomorphized Nature Informs Human-Nature Relations

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Abstract

Mother Nature is one of the most recognizable global symbols of sustainability. Despite its ubiquity in NGO campaigns, corporate communication, and international initiatives, its persuasive impact remains inconsistent. Anthropomorphic portrayals can elicit empathy and care, yet they may also foster detachment or blame. Why, then, do such portrayals resonate so differently across audiences? In this study, we examine how people construct moral meanings from representations of Mother Nature and how these meanings shape human–nature relations. Drawing on 21 interviews and 140 Reddit discussions, we identify four archetypes—the *Good Mother*, *Themis Mother*, *Submissive Mother*, and *Nemesis Mother*—each associated with a distinct relational model. Our moral–relational model explains how these meanings drive divergent emotional and behavioral responses, clarifying why symbolic portrayals sometimes backfire and offering guidance for sustainability communication strategies that foster accountability and reciprocity.

Keywords: *nature connectedness; nature relatedness; anthropomorphism; Mother Nature; interpretive.*

TRACK: Marketing and Sustainability

1) Introduction

Mother Nature features prominently in sustainability discourse (Flusberg & Thibodeau, 2023), appearing in contexts ranging from the United Nations' Mother Earth Day to corporate climate initiatives, often as a way to foster emotional connection and mobilize moral concern for pro-environmental behavior. Yet the effects are uneven. While some studies have shown that anthropomorphizing nature enhances empathy and ecological concern (Lin et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2019), others have reported counterproductive outcomes, such as detachment, fear, or even blame directed at nature (Ryland, 2000; Williams et al., 2021). This inconsistency raises thought-provoking questions: How do audiences interpret such portrayals? Why does the same anthropomorphic figure sometimes promote ecological responsibility and at other times undermine it?

To shed light on these issues, it is crucial to delve deeper into anthropomorphism itself, looking beyond the notion of a generic “human-like” quality toward the specific ways it is constructed in portrayals of Mother Nature. Maternal metaphors carry moral implications regarding who provides care, who receives it, and the conditions under which it is provided (Stearney, 1994). However, research has seldom examined in detail the moral interpretations audiences construct around the symbolically potent figure of Mother Nature or how these interpretations shape the relational stances people adopt toward the natural environment. At its core, anthropomorphism involves attributing mind—i.e., agency, emotion, and intentionality—to nonhuman entities (Epley et al., 2007; Waytz et al., 2010), thereby rendering nature a morally considerable entity (Gray et al., 2007; Gray & Wegner, 2012). Despite the growing recognition that anthropomorphism entails moral meaning-making, most research has treated moral attribution as secondary to affective or cognitive processes (Airenti, 2018; Graham et al., 2013).

In this study, we treat morality as a culturally embedded interpretive schema that informs judgments of right and wrong and structures social relations through principles such as care, justice, and reciprocity (Graham et al., 2013). From this perspective, Mother Nature personifications function as moral schemas—as a nurturing caregiver, betrayed victim, punitive force, or morally neutral presence (Pensini & McMullen, 2022); each schema implies distinct expectations, responsibilities, and relational models between humans and nature (Borovik & Pensini, 2022; Syahrivar et al., 2024; Tam, 2019). Importantly, anthropomorphic portrayals are not uniformly interpreted. When corporations or institutions deploy Mother Nature imagery, audiences may assign divergent moral meanings. Overlooking the emotions and moral logics embedded in these interpretations risks undermining the persuasive intent of sustainability messages and raises questions about the reliability of anthropomorphism as a moral communication strategy (Schimtt, 2023). Our study aims to clarify these ambiguities and answer three critical questions: (1) *How do individuals morally interpret Mother Nature?* (2) *Which relational models emerge from these interpretations?* and (3) *How do people cope with the tensions these portrayals create?* We integrate research on anthropomorphism with socio-relational models of morality (Rai & Fiske, 2011, 2012), reframing anthropomorphism as a moral meaning-making process that structures human–nature relationships.

2) Theoretical Framework

Anthropomorphism—the attribution of human characteristics, intentions, or emotions to nonhuman entities—is a pervasive psychological tendency grounded in mind perception, namely the ascription of agency (the capacity to act intentionally) and experience (the capacity to feel; Epley et al., 2007; Gray et al., 2012; Ladak et al., 2024). These dimensions carry moral significance: anthropomorphized entities may be construed as moral agents, subject to praise or blame, or as moral patients, deserving of care and protection (Gray & Wegner, 2012; Harris & Anthis, 2021; Sacchi et al., 2013). Beyond moral attribution,

anthropomorphism fulfills cognitive, effectance, and relational functions (Epley et al., 2007; Waytz et al., 2010b; Airenti, 2018). In environmental psychology, these functions have been leveraged to promote pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors (Tam, 2014; Chan, 2021; Liu et al., 2019; Tam et al., 2011). However, findings remain mixed, with several studies reporting null effects, while others suggest that the influence of anthropomorphism diminishes when controlling for relevant psychological or situational factors (Li & Li, 2025; Roach, 2003; Williams et al., 2021). This inconsistency highlights the role of cultural-symbolic variation in how anthropomorphized nature is morally interpreted. The figure of Mother Nature epitomizes this variability, embodying a Janus-faced duality—life-giving yet destructive, nurturing yet punitive—that reflects both Indigenous and non-Western cosmologies portraying nature as a sentient, moral agent (Irwin, 2022; Goduka, 2000) and Western traditions that often frame it as inert or subordinate (Gobingca, 2021; Lioi, 2003). Syntheses of these perspectives suggest three relational models through which people engage with nature: opposition, domination, and interdependence (Vidal et al., 2024). In this sense, anthropomorphism is not merely the projection of human traits but the construction of moral-relational models, where the specific moral content attributed to nature—i.e., caring, punitive, or indifferent—constitutes the kinds of relationships people adopt toward it (Fiske, 1992; Rai & Fiske, 2011, 2012; Gray et al., 2012).

3) Method

We conducted 21 in-depth interviews to explore symbolic and emotional associations with Mother Nature (Rotolo, 2022). Sampling followed a logic of theoretical diversity to capture variation across gender, age, residential context, and levels of pro-environmental concern. The final sample included 8 men and 13 women, aged 22 to 63, all residing in a European country. Using photo-elicitation techniques (Harper, 2002), participants were shown a curated set of images depicting Mother Nature in diverse styles and contexts. They were invited to share their immediate impressions, emotional reactions, and any personal or cultural associations the images evoked. This method elicited implicit cultural knowledge and moral intuitions that might not surface through direct questioning (Boutyline & Soter, 2021). To complement these elicited accounts, we analyzed 140 Reddit posts and discussion threads referencing Mother Nature, which provided additional cultural frames and emotional registers beyond self-identified sustainability audiences.

Both datasets were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014). We then synthesized emergent themes through the semiotic square (Greimas, 1987), which organizes symbolic meanings along two perpendicular axes of opposition. This framework enabled us to position each moral archetype in relation to its opposite, its negation, and the broader system of tensions structuring human–nature moral relationships (Kozinets, 2008).

4) Findings

Our analysis of the two complementary datasets, mapped through the semiotic square, revealed that audiences construct four distinct yet coexisting moral archetypes of Mother Nature (Figure 1; Table 1). Each archetype combines specific moral motives, mind perception profiles, and moral–relational models, shaping expectations about how humans should relate to nature and what forms of behavior are legitimate. The semiotic square highlighted two fundamental oppositions: nurturing *versus* punitive moral motives, and empowered *versus* vulnerable capacities. The combination of these dimensions produced a symbolic space where each archetype holds a distinct moral position, defined in contrast or opposition to the others.

4.1 Moral Archetypes

Given the centrality of care in representations of Mother Nature, we begin with the primary opposition between the *Good Mother* and the *Themis Mother*. The *Good Mother* embodies an ethics of care—attuned to human needs, endlessly nurturing, self-sacrificing, and reliably present for those who depend on her. She conveys the unconditionality, gratuity, and continuity of care: “If I think about Mother Nature, I think about care. Care is giving repeatedly, and not to get something back” (Maria). In contrast, the *Themis Mother* embodies an ethics of blind justice, one that transcends human understandings of fairness: “Mother Nature’s like an impartial system that always seeks to restore balance and way beyond what we can grasp. She’s blind” (Alejandro). This opposition sets motherly care against impartial fairness.

From these two poles, their negations generate two further archetypes. The negation of care gives rise to the *Nemesis Mother*, a figure of nature as angry, vengeful, and punitive toward humans: “She is taking revenge for what humans did to her” (Jean-Luc). Conversely, the negation of fairness produces the *Submissive Mother*, characterized by sadness, resignation, and endurance in the face of harm: “It’s like she’s just given up... like nature is tired of fighting” (Lucas).

These four representations can be further organized along the two overarching dimensions of mind perception (Gray & Wegner, 2012; Ladack et al., 2024): agency and experience. The *Good Mother* and the *Themis Mother* embody agency, understood as the capacity to plan and act, through active care in the case of the *Good Mother*, and through principled judgment in the case of the *Themis Mother*. By contrast, the *Submissive Mother* and the *Nemesis Mother* are situated closer to the realm of experience, where the moral emotions attributed to nature are the defining element. The *Submissive Mother* is associated with sadness, a passive and helpless emotion (e.g., “like she’s accepted what’s happening”), whereas the *Nemesis Mother* is portrayed as driven by anger, an active and vindictive moral emotion (e.g., “angrily invades a space”).

Along the second diagonal of the model, we observe a sharp contradiction between the *Good Mother* and the *Nemesis Mother*. The *Nemesis Mother* emphasizes anger and revenge; these emotions are entirely absent from the nurturing and forgiving portrayal of the *Good Mother*. This contrast exposes a tension within culturally constructed maternal expectations: the *Good Mother* embodies the stereotypical ideal of motherhood, defined by continuous care and unconditional giving (Schmidt, 2023), whereas the *Nemesis Mother* subverts this ideal by asserting revenge and retribution (Chemaly, 2019). A second key opposition lies between the *Themis Mother* and the *Submissive Mother*, reflecting a contradiction in attributed agency. The *Themis Mother* symbolizes the capacity to enact justice, albeit impartial or emotionally detached, while the *Submissive Mother* lacks the power to act, passively enduring harm.

4.2 Moral-Relational Models

Each representation of Mother Nature embeds a distinct moral–relational model.

The *Good Mother* evokes a non-reciprocal relational model, where nature is expected to give endlessly without receiving care in return. Affection exists, but it does not translate into moral responsibility toward nature. Instead, it creates a secure yet one-sided attachment: “Of course, it makes me feel guilty. But then, when I go back into nature, I still feel that warmth, that sense of being comforted. It’s like she welcomes me” (Lucas).

The *Themis Mother* reflects an anxious relational model, marked by uncertainty and vigilance. Despite recognizing nature’s indifference, individuals monitor her perceived signals and adjust their behavior so as not to trespass boundaries, without feeling morally recognized by Nature or assured of reciprocity: “I try to figure out where the limits are—what she might tolerate” (Carolina).

The *Submissive Mother* embodies an abusive relational model, in which harm to nature not only persists but deepens, as she is perceived as incapable of asserting limits within her caring relationship with humans: “She’s like someone you care about that you mistreat, but she is there for you and you know it, you know she’ll always be there for you. But you continue to mistreat her” (Lucas).

Finally, the *Nemesis Mother* reflects an avoidant relational model. Her vindictive anger forecloses intimacy or attachment, leading individuals to withdraw or reject the very possibility of a relationship: “It’s hard to imagine having a real relationship with her... I’d feel attacked” (Helena).

4.3 Coping Strategies

These portrayals are not static. Individuals often move fluidly between them, developing coping strategies to manage their moral and emotional contradictions. We identified four such strategies: *Assimilative Subordination*, *Reconfiguration*, *Dismissal of Anthropomorphism*, and *Representational Avoidance*.

Assimilative Subordination occurs when new information is absorbed into a dominant portrayal. Here, the *Themis Mother* is subordinated to the *Good Mother*: Nature remains maternal, justice is reframed as protective self-sacrifice, and even disruption is interpreted as a necessary cost of safeguarding the broader web of life. In this way, potentially dissonant elements are explained away within the logic of care.

Reconfiguration differs in that inconsistent information is not assimilated but kept separate, in a more narrowly defined category. The *Good Mother* remains dominant, while the *Themis Mother* is reframed as a “strict” mother: a stern figure who sets limits and enforces consequences to instill respect through discipline.

Dismissal of Anthropomorphism takes place when the very act of personifying nature becomes unacceptable because certain portrayals attribute emotionally or morally intolerable traits to her. Here, individuals reject anthropomorphism altogether to preserve their existing ideas of motherhood and avoid portrayals that feel incompatible with them.

Representational Avoidance, by contrast, does not reject anthropomorphism as such but suppresses specific threatening figures. Individuals silence, bracket, or push aside distressing representations—such as the *Nemesis Mother*—that feel too emotionally or existentially destabilizing.

5) Discussion

5.1 Theoretical contributions

Our findings demonstrate that audiences do not perceive anthropomorphized nature as a generic ‘human-like’ entity, but as distinct moral characters that shape relational orientations and behavioral responses. By analyzing the moral meanings embedded in different portrayals of Mother Nature, we shift anthropomorphism research from a broad conceptual label to a more nuanced framework that explains divergent audience reactions.

First, we reconceptualize anthropomorphism as a moral meaning-making process that integrates mind perception (Gray et al., 2007), moral character theory (Goodwin et al., 2014), and moral-relational models (Rai & Fiske, 2011) into a single interpretive framework. This reframing enriches existing understandings by unveiling anthropomorphism’s role in symbolic moralization and challenges the assumption that emotional closeness to nature is inherently prosocial. Our results reveal that idealized portrayals, such as the *Good Mother*, can foster non-reciprocal attachment, whereby people feel cared for but perceive no obligation to reciprocate. This insight extends anthropomorphism theory by highlighting the normative and relational conditions under which symbolic portrayals either promote or undermine sustainability goals.

Second, we introduce an empirically grounded typology of four moral archetypes: the *Good Mother*, *Themis Mother*, *Submissive Mother*, and *Nemesis Mother*. Each archetype integrates moral motives, mind perception profiles, and moral–relational models, offering greater conceptual clarity for understanding why similar anthropomorphic cues can lead to markedly different outcomes. Whereas earlier work has characterized Mother Nature as “Janus-faced” (Merchant, 1980), our typology specifies the distinct moral logics and relational expectations underpinning each portrayal, thereby illuminating the psychological granularity that produces these varied effects.

Third, we extend Rai and Fiske’s (2011, 2012) relational model of morality, providing a theoretical foundation for studies on anthropomorphism and human–nonhuman relations. While prior work suggests that relational models (e.g., communal sharing, authority ranking) guide moral judgment—so that a given action is interpreted differently depending on the relational model in which it occurs—, our study shows that moral attributions may also shape the relational stance individuals adopt. This inversion in the link between moral judgment and relational orientation reveals how moral principles and emotions attributed to symbolic agents inform the perceived relational model, even when the agent is nonhuman.

Finally, our work opens broader avenues for research on archetype dynamics, including how portrayals evolve over time, merge into hybrid forms, and interact in public discourse to shape environmental attitudes and actions. Understanding these dynamics can help scholars explain the cumulative, long-term effects of anthropomorphism in sustainability communication and provide a platform for future inquiry into the cultural life cycle of moral archetypes.

5.2 Practical implications

Our findings provide public institutions, NGOs, corporations, educators, and media practitioners with a diagnostic framework for assessing and refining anthropomorphic portrayals of nature, helping ensure that such representations avoid ethical pitfalls while fostering sustained engagement. Specifically, we highlight the risks and unintended consequences associated with three of the most prevalent archetypes in sustainability communication: the *Good Mother*, the *Submissive Mother*, and the *Nemesis Mother*. Although culturally resonant and emotionally compelling, these figures can also generate counterproductive effects that undermine long-term sustainability goals.

For example, corporate communications frequently draw on *Good Mother* imagery, which can inspire affection and gratitude but also risks fostering complacency, leaving audiences feeling cared for without perceiving a reciprocal duty to protect. Local NGO campaigns on coral bleaching often depict nature as a fragile, *Submissive Mother*; while this portrayal may evoke protective impulses, it reinforces a paternalistic stance that undermines mutual respect and inadvertently legitimizes human dominance. Post-disaster coverage in outlets like National Geographic commonly frames nature as a punitive *Nemesis Mother*, which may provoke short-term compliance through fear but often generates fatalism and disengagement.

By contrast, we identify the *Good–Themis Mother*—combining warmth with moral authority—as a particularly effective archetype for cultivating reciprocity and accountability. The New Zealand Tiaki Promise tourism initiative exemplifies this framing, presenting nature as both guardian and moral equal, thereby inviting visitors into a relationship of shared care.

More broadly, we argue that anthropomorphic portrayals should not be treated as neutral rhetorical devices but as moral signals that actively shape relational models. This underscores the need to pre-test archetypal effects with target audiences to ensure alignment between intended moral framing and actual interpretation. Especially in climate crisis communication, deliberate selection, refinement, and, where appropriate, hybridization of archetypes is critical

for crafting messages that are culturally resonant, ethically sound, and capable of sustaining reciprocal human–nature relationships.

Figure 1. Representations of Mother Nature

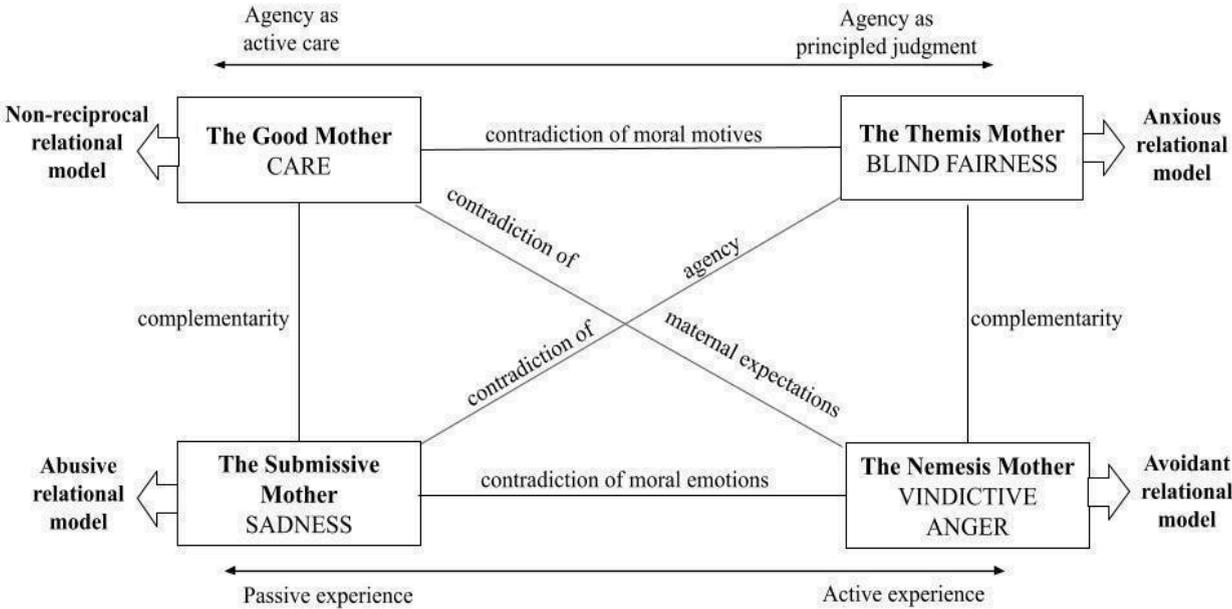


Table 1. Illustrative quotes

	<i>Good Mother</i>	<i>Themis Mother</i>	<i>Submissive Mother</i>	<i>Nemesis Mother</i>
moral construction	<p>“If I think about <i>Mother Nature</i>, I think about care. Care is, for me, giving without reason, giving repeatedly, and not to get something back. And nature cares about us in this way. She unconditionally offers. It’s like a mother for whom the primary purpose is the well-being of her child—that’s the kind of care that matters most.” (Maria)</p> <p>“She [<i>Mother Nature</i>] gives life and provides for us” (Herrfreitag, 2022)</p> <p>“Even when her child [referring to himself as a recipient of Nature care] does something wrong, she never stops loving them.” (Bruno)</p>	<p>“<i>Mother Nature</i>’s like an impartial system that always seeks to restore balance. She just follows her own rules and way beyond what we can grasp. She’s blind.” (Lucas)</p> <p>“<i>Mother Nature</i> doesn’t understand cruelty or kindness. She only understands survival/not survival at the species level” (Low-Commercial-5364, 17 June 2025).</p> <p>“It’s like she has a code, and everything happens by that code. She doesn’t care about us, and we can’t fully know how she’ll react.” (Paloma).</p>	<p>“It’s like she’s just given up... like Nature is tired of fighting. She’s still there, but quieter, sad, like she’s accepted what’s happening and is slowly fading away.” (Lucas)</p> <p>She’s just gone quiet, like she’s given up hoping we’ll take care of her. It’s almost like she knows better than to expect anything from us now (Isabelle).</p> <p>“When the floods come, or the fires start, it feels like she’s crying out for help. It’s a sad kind of plea, like something that’s been held in too long and finally breaks through.” (Helena)</p>	<p>“<i>Mother Nature</i> has a strong will to live and becomes angry when humans violate her order. If a river floods and angrily invades a space, it’s probably because that space was taken from her.” (Danielle)</p> <p>“She is taking revenge for what humans did to her. It is a way of restoring justice, even through violence.” (Jean-Luc). “This [commenting on pictures of a storm] just shows how dangerous nature can be if u [sic] don’t treat it nicely” (DecaPanda, 16 June 2025)</p>
relational model	<p>“I’m a feminist, I mean—I don’t believe women should have to give everything up for their kids. [...] With <i>Mother Nature</i>, it’s like... I can’t help but relate her to this collective and stereotypical imaginary of what it means to be a mother—like, endlessly giving, like a mom who never stops caring.” (Danielle)</p> <p>“Of course, it makes me feel guilty. But then, when I go back into nature, I still feel that warmth, that sense of being comforted. It’s like she welcomes me, and that makes me feel at peace.” (Lucas)</p>	<p>“You have to always be on alert because it’s like you’re never safe. One moment she’s calm, and the next she can turn against you.” (Nina)</p> <p>“I push myself only to a certain limit, not to overpower her. I try to figure out where the limits are—what she might tolerate.” (Carolina)</p>	<p>“Of course I don’t want to make her suffer. But I don’t feel that responsible either. The change has to start from others. Maybe I’ll follow.” (Bruno)</p> <p>“She’s like someone you care about that you mistreat, but she is there for you and you know it, you know she’ll always be there for you. But you continue to mistreat her.” (Lucas)</p>	<p>“I don’t know... if Nature is just vengeful, angry and out to get us, it’s hard to imagine having a real relationship with her. I mean, if we were talking about a person who’s vengeful, I’d feel attacked—and that’s kind of how it feels with her sometimes.” (Helena)</p>

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