Journal of Sustainability Education
Vol. 32, March 2026
ISSN: 2151-7452

Listening Into Kinship:
Cultivating Relational Values Through Deep Listening

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Abstract: This article explores the contemplative practice of deep listening as a method to both understand and embody human-nature relational values for positive transformations. Relational values, which emphasize kinship, reciprocity, and interdependence, expand beyond traditional intrinsic and instrumental value frameworks by centering relationships between humans and the more-than-human world. Drawing on sound studies, Indigenous knowledge, and ecological philosophy, deep listening invites an embodied attentiveness that promotes environmental empathy and ethical relationality. The practice moves beyond abstract conceptualizations to lived sensory experience, opening pathways for reflection, mutual accountability, and a renewed sense of shared identity and well-being within damaged ecological relationships. Case studies from Indigenous stewardship, environmental education and activism, and soundscape ecology illustrate how listening practices reinforce kinship, reciprocity, and a deepened sense of ecological identity, challenging anthropocentric paradigms and promoting multispecies ethics. The article argues that deep listening is an ethical praxis essential for navigating complex ecological crises, grounding transformative environmental engagement in relational awareness and shared responsibility. It focuses on pedagogical and community-based practices through which deep listening cultivates relational values and multispecies care, with potential future applications in environmental activism and governance.

Keywords: Relational values, deep listening, contemplative pedagogy, nature connection, attention, kinship

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In a time of ecological crisis and accelerating global change, foundational questions of value shape how individuals, communities, and societies engage with the living world. Environmental values are neither abstract nor monolithic; they emerge from dialogues between personal experience, cultural memory, and collective history, presenting both philosophical and methodological challenges for assessment and action (Vakil, 2021; Trommsdorff, 2009). Traditional value frameworks have often oscillated between instrumental values (nature as a resource for human use) and intrinsic values (nature as worthy in itself). Yet these paradigms can overlook the richness of lived relationships – the context-specific, reciprocal bonds humans form with the more-than-human world. Such bonds, now termed *relational values*, have become a central focus for scholars exploring new ways to articulate and assess environmental meaning and responsibility.

Values, as persistent cognitive and moral elements, serve as scaffolding for both personal and collective life, shaping how societies define, pursue, and assess what matters most (Jones et al., 2016; Reser & Bentrupperbäumer, 2005). Schwartz (1994), building on Rokeach, defines values as beliefs "pertaining to desirable end states or modes of conduct that transcend specific situations, guide selection or evaluation of behaviour, people, and events, and ordered by importance relative to other values to form a system of value priorities" (p. 20). While such accounts clarify how values function as relatively stable guides to judgment and behavior, they have tended to emphasize abstract, individual-level priorities rather than the specific, lived relationships that bind people with places and more-than-human kin.

Relational Values: Interconnection and Reciprocity

Within contemporary environmental values scholarship, relational values (RVs) have emerged as a vital framework that focuses not just on what matters, but on how and why the relationships themselves matter. Unlike instrumental values or intrinsic values, RVs represent a third value system reflecting the reciprocal qualities of relationships between humans and the more-than-human world (Chan et al., 2016; Himes & Muraca, 2018; Mattijssen et al., 2020; Post, 2024b). They express concepts like kinship and reciprocity, as well as care and the lived experience of interdependence that shapes people's identities and well-being in relation to particular places and more-than-human communities (Tobin, 2022; Hettinger & Throop, 1999; Post, 2024b; Salmon, 2000). While relational values have only recently been formalized as a distinct analytic framework in environmental governance and social science, the ethical orientations they describe have long been articulated and practiced within Indigenous knowledge systems. Framing RVs as "emergent" in academic discourse therefore risks obscuring these deeper genealogies and the colonial histories that elevated instrumental and intrinsic value logics as dominant. Attending to these roots invites an understanding of RVs not simply as a novel category, but as a partial reclamation and rearticulation of longstanding Indigenous and place-based relational ethics within contemporary valuation debates.

This kincentric view – a worldview shared and articulated in Indigenous scholarship and practice (Bang et al., 2014; Jacobs & Narváez, 2022; Post, 2024a; Salmon, 2000) – describes an ethos of cooperation and co-creation rooted in the relationships themselves (Mattijssen et al., 2020; Moran et al., 2018). RVs resist anthropocentric narratives steeped in dualism and human exceptionalism and re-situate human well-being as contingent upon interdependence with the

earth and its more-than-human inhabitants. By reorienting prevailing paradigms, RVs center relationality, reciprocity, and care, fostering a sense of kinship and belonging that dissolves boundaries between people and place. Thus, relational values move beyond abstract principles to embody a lived ethic of relationships, grounded in shared identity and well-being with the land and all its beings. "Land is, therefore we are" (Bang et al., 2014, p. 45).

Relational values are best understood as fundamentally context-specific and non-substitutable; their worth arises from the particular, lived and felt connection – such as the unique attachment one might have to a specific river, grove of trees, or birdsong – rather than to an abstract or interchangeable category of rivers or forests (Mattijssen et al., 2020; Post, 2024b). These values are characterized by mutuality and reciprocity, meaning human-nature relationships are shaped by ongoing processes of influence, care, and response, a pattern echoed in Indigenous philosophies and the ethics of many conservation movements, where relationships are recognized as reciprocal and co-creative (Diver et al., 2019; Gould et al., 2019; Skubel et al., 2019). Unlike intrinsic values, which are thought to reside within an entity itself, or instrumental values, which emphasize usefulness or utility, relational values emerge in the ongoing bond, the relationship itself, and the broader living network to which both humans and more-than-humans belong (Chan et al., 2016; Knippenberg et al. 2018).

Deep Listening: An Embodied Practice

A powerful way to both understand relational values and cultivate them as lived practice is through *deep listening*, a contemplative discipline first described by composer and sound pioneer Pauline Oliveros. When Oliveros and her ensemble recorded their seminal Deep Listening album in 1988, they did so in a vast underground cistern in Washington State, a space with a forty-five second reverberation time. In this extraordinary acoustic environment, every sound lingered, overlapped, and invited unpredictable interactions. The musicians had to move beyond simply playing their parts – they needed to listen deeply, not just to each other but to the entire space, allowing the resonant qualities of the cistern to "play them back" as full participants in the musical experience. This process required a stance of profound receptivity – through mutual responsiveness, adaptation, and letting go of individual control, the ensemble practiced genuine co-creation with each other and the environment, embodying the essence of relational values. (Stewart, 2012; Williger, 2020). Recordings from Oliveros' cistern performance and related Deep Listening projects are widely available through public audio and video archives, including the extended reverberation and sonic co-creation described here.

Oliveros later described deep listening as a form of "radical attentiveness" – a dyadic, embodied openness to the present moment and all that it contains (Oliveros, 2005, 2010). Deep listening is not limited to the ears; it invites engagement with the whole body, memory, imagination, and empathy, fostering a profound connection with sound as a medium of relationship and communication. Over time, deep listening has become an ethos, "an awareness of and attention to the harmonic interconnectivity of all beings and objects" (Lipari, 2015, p. 2–3). This form of attunement goes beyond heightened perceptual acuity – it cultivates ethical relationality, centering reciprocal care, attentiveness, and openness across the boundaries of the human and more-than-human world (Bjelica, 2022; Lipari, 2015).

ISSN: 2151-7452

From Birdsong to Silence

Deep listening is perhaps most intuitively understood in the context of nature, where sound becomes a primary way of sensing relationship. Biologist David G. Haskell describes his own practice of listening to birdsong as a "gateway" to deeper relationality, a discipline through which he recalibrates perception, sees himself in relation to the living world, and experiences presence as part of a "community of voices" (Haskell, 2018, 2022). For Haskell, birdsong is not simply sound; it is the connective tissue that weaves together ecological and social meaning, memory, and belonging. Public talks and audio examples by Haskell offer accessible entry points into these forest soundscapes, inviting listeners to practice this form of relational attention in their own contexts.

Haskell describes "how sound connects us, not just to one another but to the very fabric of animate and inanimate life" (Haskell, 2022). The auditory landscape is both medium and message – by giving attention to the sounds in nature, practitioners of deep listening cultivate a kind of kinesthetic empathy – an embodied awareness of mutual impact and interdependence. Oliveros, too, wrote that "we listen in order to interpret our world and experience meaning. Our world is a complex matter of vibrating energy, matter and air just as we are made of vibrations. Vibration connects us to all things interdependently" (Oliveros, 2010, p. 78).

Listening unfolds not only within the fullness of sound but crucially in the silences and the subtle spaces between, where connection and meaning emerge. For example, in the silent intervals between the song phrases of the hermit thrush, there is a moment for echo, communion, and attunement – much like the silent resonance present in deeply felt relationships (Oliveros, 2010). This "listen[ing] beyond the sound" (Haskell, 2012) attunes to the relationships and stories interwoven in sound and silence alike. Such an approach reveals a layered sensory and relational field where absence actively shapes perception and experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Silence and sound are acoustic territories of relationality that create "connective moments" (LaBelle, 2010), like ethnomusicologist Steven Feld's concept of "acoustemology" (1996), in which silence and sound are co-constitutive elements of knowing and being-in-place, or "that which people know through what they hear" (Feld, 2015). Oliveros' practice of balancing "focal" and "global" listening cultivates this expanded perceptual field, blending focused attention with an open awareness of the entire sonic environment (Oliveros, 2010). Through this interplay, listening becomes an embodied, ethical presence that acknowledges the intricate interdependencies shaping the world.

Listening as Ethical Attunement

The implications of deep listening extend far beyond the purely aesthetic; deep listening functions as a catalyst for ethical relationality and environmental responsibility by cultivating forms of ethical attunement (Bjelica, 2022; Jenkins, 2021). Through practices of attentive, embodied listening, individuals become sensitized to the micro-events of landscapes, the agency and vulnerabilities of other beings, and the entangled consequences of human actions within shared ecological networks (Stuart-Smith, 2021). This ethical attunement resonates with Donna Haraway's concept of "staying with the trouble" (2015), inviting openness to multispecies interdependencies and mutual becoming. The practice encourages an active participation in "co-becoming" or "co-habitation," where listening and responding constitute ongoing relational

accountability and collective shaping of futures (Jenkins, 2021). Deep listening is an ethical praxis that situates sensory awareness as foundational to transformative environmental engagement (Bjelica, 2022). Oliveros' insight, "What is heard is changed by listening and it, in turn, changes the listener" (Oliveros, 2010, p. 74), encapsulates this reflexive dynamic, emphasizing that cultivating relational values is rooted not in abstract ideals but in sustained, attentive practice. Through this living method, deep listening invites a participatory and transformative approach to ethical relations across human and more-than-human worlds. In this way, deep listening does not prescribe particular actions in advance but orients listeners toward more responsive, accountable choices in their everyday interactions with places, beings, and communities, preparing the ground for the more explicit practices explored in the following section.

Listening in Action

The concept of listening as a catalyst for environmental awareness has gained substantial traction across multiple disciplines, ranging from ecological sciences and soundscape research to environmental education and activism. These diverse approaches underscore the transformative potential of sound and listening to reconfigure human relations with the more-than-human world.

Indigenous communities worldwide exemplify how listening practices and relational values are deeply intertwined with environmental stewardship, offering rich models of ethical cohabitation. In the Hawaiian Islands, Native Hawaiian conservation paradigms center on kincentric ethics (Jacobs & Narváez, 2022) where land (ʻāina), sea (kai), and species are regarded as kin to whom humans owe reciprocal care and respect (Gauthier et al., 2025; Gould et al., 2019). This worldview emphasizes listening beyond human-centric sounds towards multispecies communication – attending to seasonal cycles, animal calls, plant phenology, and ecological rhythms that critically inform adaptive management (Diaz-Reyes, 2019; Fisher, 2024).

Similarly, the Menominee Nation in Wisconsin exemplifies forest stewardship deeply informed by long-term observational knowledge and a relational mode of attentive listening to the forest and its more-than-human inhabitants (Long, 2024). Menominee forest management practices arise from reciprocal relationships with the land, where sustainability of the forest is inseparable from the sustainability of cultural life. Their stewardship is characterized by a multisensory attentiveness that tunes into ecological rhythms, species behaviors, and the broader vitality of the forest community, guiding thoughtful harvesting and regeneration practices that sustain ecosystem health alongside cultural continuity (Grignon & Kimmerer, 2017; Vannini & Vannini, 2019).

In Australia, Aboriginal fire stewardship practices ("cultural burning") exemplify sonic attentiveness to fire sounds, wind directions, and ecological responses, allowing nuanced control of fire regimes that enhance biodiversity and mitigate destructive wildfires (Manning, 2023). These fire stewardship practices exemplify not only ecological care but an ethic of listening – hearing fire, wind, and land as relational partners.

Beyond specific land management, Indigenous knowledge systems often incorporate listening into spiritual and ceremonial contexts, where attentiveness to the voices of ancestors, spirits, and the more-than human world reinforces ethical obligations and deepens relational awareness (Atleo, 2020; Berkes, 2012). Indigenous listening is an embodied, context-specific

ISSN: 2151-7452

practice inseparable from relational values of care, responsibility, and co-creation. Listening enables responsiveness to ecological feedback and encourages kinship ties that dissolve distinctions between humans and nature. As Indigenous scholars emphasize, such relational ontologies challenge anthropocentric paradigms, urging a radical re-orientation toward multispecies ethics essential for addressing global environmental challenges (Whyte, 2013; Coulthard, 2014).

In education, listening emerges as a versatile pedagogical strategy to cultivate embodied environmental awareness and ethical reflexivity. There are many variations of *guided soundwalks* in both natural or urban settings, where students engage with diverse soundscapes – bird vocalizations, wind in trees, flowing water, and anthropogenic noises – to develop sensory acuity and ecological literacy (Haskell, 2018). These exercises enable learners to situate themselves relationally within multispecies communities, deepening affective ties to place and biophysical interdependencies (Droumeva, 2023; Westerkamp, 2017).

Contemplative listening techniques based on Oliveros' work are a common strategy in environmental education. Students practice shifting between *focal listening* (directed attention to specific sounds) and *global listening* (awareness of entire soundscape), an exercise that teaches mindfulness and relational attunement (Diggens, 2016; Oliveros, 2005; Loveless et al., 2025). Such embodied practices cultivate sensory patience, empathy, and ethical engagement, complementing conceptual curriculum content on sustainability and environmental justice.

Another classroom innovation involves integrating music-based environmental curricula that foreground eco-musicological practices and soundscape composition as tools for environmental activism and awareness. Reich (2016) highlights how soundscape composition – a musical genre that incorporates natural and human-made sounds – challenges traditional boundaries between humans, nature, and technology by inviting listeners into an active engagement with place and environment. By integrating field recordings, sonifications, and interactive sonic projects, soundscape compositions enable students to experience environmental knowledge through sound as a dynamic communicative medium, fostering sensory attunement and ethical reflection (Aktaş, 2024; Farina et al., 2021).

In these pedagogical contexts, the sonic dimensions of environmental knowledge – voices of forests, rivers, and other beings – are explored through diverse musical genres and sound-based projects, amplifying sound's role as cultural and ecological expression (Karvelas, 2020; Krause, 2016). These methods embed ethical listening within scholarship and creativity, enhancing students' critical awareness of human-nature relationships and cultivating a participatory ethos aimed at sustainability and environmental justice.

Taken together, these Indigenous stewardship practices and pedagogical approaches demonstrate how deep listening can function as a relational ethic that orients people toward more just and sustainable responses to ecological degradation. By emphasizing reciprocity, accountability, and multispecies communication, listening practices help practitioners recognize ecological crises not only as biophysical problems but as ruptures in relationship that call for repaired ways of living with land, waters, and more-than-human kin. In this sense, deep listening becomes a pathway into transformative environmental engagement, linking everyday practices of attention to broader struggles for ecological resilience and justice.

Broader Research and Activism

Recent advances in soundscape ecology highlight how deep listening can cultivate ethical awareness and support transformative connections with ecosystems (Farina & Gage, 2017; Sueur et al., 2014). Acoustic monitoring tools, such as Acoustic Complexity Indices and participatory sound mapping, not only provide powerful empirical data on biodiversity and environmental shifts but also invite communities into co-creative roles as attentive listeners and stewards of their local soundscapes (Pijanowski et al., 2024). This collective engagement honors relational values by reinforcing human and more-than-human interdependencies and generating shared knowledge grounded in lived place-based experience.

The emerging field of acoustic justice shines a critical light on how unequal soundscapes reflect and perpetuate environmental injustices, with marginalized populations disproportionately burdened by noise pollution (Edusei, 2022; Dreger et al., 2019). For many communities, these sonic inequities manifest as chronic exposure to traffic, aviation, and industrial noise that not only elevates human stress and health risks but also masks birdsong and other animal calls, disrupting courtship, foraging, and predator-prey communication. In this way, noise pollution interrupts the communicative ecologies of more-than-human worlds at the same time that it undermines the well-being and self-determination of human residents, underscoring the deeply relational stakes of acoustic justice. Listening here becomes a form of ethical advocacy, amplifying vulnerabilities of both humans and more-than-humans and demanding equitable access to sonic environments that nurture health and dignity (Barklay, 2013; Clark, 2024; Loveless et al., 2025). Through relational listening, activists emphasize that soundscapes are not merely background noise but vital processes that shape quality of life and multispecies coexistence.

Artists and environmental activists have harnessed sound-based practices such as field recordings, sound installations, and collaborative listening events to materialize the otherwise intangible impacts of environmental disruption and climate change. These creative modalities promote multisensory, affective forms of ecological witnessing, cultivating empathy, solidarity, and a sense of shared responsibility across species and cultures (LaBelle, 2010; Westerkamp, 2017). Such practices embody deep listening as a relational ethic that reconnects listeners to their surroundings and each other.

Embodied listening praxis enriches pedagogy by cultivating relational consciousness and ethical presence in learners. Students can engage deeply with the sonic dimensions of place, revealing the interwoven vitality and fragilities of ecological communities (Krause, 2016; Reich, 2016; Schuurman-Olson, 2023). This relational learning teaches the care, humility, and reciprocal accountability essential for transformative environmental engagement.

Listening Into Kinship

Deep listening is more than a contemplative act; it is a practice that invites us to pause, attend, and participate in the ongoing song of the living world. As an embodied mode of relationality, deep listening nurtures kinship, reciprocity, and care by sensitizing us to every note, silence, and breath within our shared sonic environment (Jenkins, 2021; Lipari, 2015; Oliveros, 2010). It calls us to a mutual responsibility that extends beyond individual beings or objects,

ISSN: 2151-7452

encompassing the vital relationships that weave the world together (Barclay, 2013; Bjelica, 2022).

Botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer's reflection, "It's not just land that is broken, but more importantly, our relationship to land" (2013, p. 9), offers a powerful invitation to critically re-examine our deeply held values and identities within a living, breathing world. Deep listening encourages recognition of our integral interdependence with human and more-than-human communities, embracing the gifts of kinship and belonging. Through attentiveness to the connections – the spaces between – that define our existence, we open toward vulnerability, mutual becoming, and ethical cohabitation. This relational practice guides us toward collective responsibility and transformation, offering a participatory ethic rooted in care, responsiveness, and shared presence.

Practically, the relational awareness cultivated through deep listening can move beyond the contemplative moment into concrete ecological engagement. In educational and community settings, practices such as soundwalking and soundsitting, as well as soundweaving – a collaborative listening practice that invites participatory co-composition with human and more-than-human sounds – can guide participants into place-based stewardship projects, listening-centered dialogue, and more careful multispecies coexistence. By attending to how bodies, places, and voices meet in shared sonic environments, deep listening helps participants recognize their responsibilities within damaged landscapes and invites small, situated acts of repair that can contribute to broader cultural shifts in how communities respond to ecological crises.

Deep listening offers a path to transformative ecological engagement by cultivating environmental empathy and ethical relationality. It moves us beyond abstract ideas into lived, sensory experiences that deepen our connection to place and community. This practice opens pathways for ongoing reflection, mutual accountability, and collective stewardship within a more-than-human world (Chan et al., 2016; Haskell, 2018; Oliveros, 2010). Through deep listening, individuals and communities develop embodied awareness of interdependence and shared responsibility, nurturing the relational values essential for ecological resilience and ethical cohabitation.

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Vol. 32 March 2026
ISSN: 2151-7452