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EDITORIAL

What is 'relational thinking', and how does it manifest in research?

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Abstract

1. *People and Nature* is a 'journal of relational thinking'. This editorial explores what relational thinking can mean and how it might be operationalized in the context of humans and the environment.
2. Relational thinking may seem intuitive because it recognizes the world's inherent interconnectedness. However, the question of how to operationalize relational thinking in social-ecological research is rich and multifaceted. This is because doing research that embraces and advances relational thinking can be complex, particularly when research expands beyond social science to human–nature relationships with diverse organisms and ecological systems.
3. This editorial offers one synthesis of existing work on relational thinking and outlines practical suggestions for how to recognize and implement deeper relationality in research. It synthesizes nine themes that can offer guidance for researchers who aim to clarify and strengthen how their research employs and advances relational thinking.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Relational thinking is experiencing what might be called an academic renaissance. Though it has existed intellectually for a long time and in many forms, these days the academic world is paying it increasing attention. This is largely due to the limitations of reductionist views for conceptualizing and engaging with social-ecological challenges. *People and Nature* entered the publishing arena as part of this recent recognition of relationality's importance. One of the journal's aims is to further the scholarly conversation of interdisciplinary relational thinking—especially that which incorporates both social and ecological scholarship. We see relational thinking as a space of emergent thought, dynamic understanding, and diverse voices: a place where scholarship can push boundaries.

Yet what relational thinking is, and how it might inform and guide studies that examine connections between people and nature, is often unclear. This Editorial reflects on the meaning of relational thinking and provides examples of how it might be put into practice. We hope this serves as both a support and an invitation to researchers to explore and reflect on relational thinking. Central

to our approach is recognition that many definitions and permutations of relational thinking exist; we offer one perspective with no claim to be definitive. This piece builds on previous editorials where we have analysed the Journal's emerging academic signature (Fish et al., 2022) and reflected on the publishing experience from the perspective of both reviewers and authors (Gaston et al., 2025). Here, we delve deeply into how we, as editors at *People and Nature*, currently understand research as 'relational'.

This editorial has two goals:

1. To offer a *concise description* of how relational thinking can be understood.
2. To provide a *list of characteristics* of relational research (building upon published helpful summaries), accompanied by *examples of papers* from *People and Nature* that embody these different characteristics in important and diverse ways.

For the field overall, this editorial aims to offer a helpful set of considerations and relevant examples. For *People and Nature*, we hope that it will aid coherence between editors, reviewers, and authors on what relational thinking means and how research can enact it. We hope the paper will also support prospective authors considering submission to *People and Nature* who are unsure of whether or how their work might engage with relational thinking in human–environment interactions.

2 | WHAT IS RELATIONAL THINKING AND WHAT IS ITS HISTORY?

At its core, relational thinking foregrounds relationships, processes, and interdependencies rather than discrete entities. Nothing exists in isolation—atoms, cells, organisms, people, ecosystems. All of these are woven together in relations; relations are a reality of how the world is. Relational thinking not only acknowledges this interdependence, but brings it to centre stage philosophically, conceptually, and analytically.

Relational thinking thus focuses on interactions between things, rather than things in isolation. This contrasts with non-relational forms of thinking that focus on independent properties of entities themselves. Relational thinking sees 'things' in the world not as separate entities, but as interlinked and constructed through interactions. This orientation can lead to a series of themes of research informed by relational thinking. We offer nine such themes in Section 2.

There is no one history of 'relational thinking', because there is no one version of relational thinking. Many ways of understanding the world— for instance, those associated with many Indigenous and place-based groups— have been relational since time immemorial. Examples abound, in Africa (Wiredu, 1994), Latin Americas (Gallegos-Riofrio et al., 2022), North America (Gould et al., 2023), Asia (Jolly et al., 2022), and Australia (Arnold, 2025). Relatedly, recent psychological research suggests that the majority of the world's people—those in less-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) societies—tend to think more relationally than people in more-WEIRD societies (though great diversity exists both within and between societies) (Gould et al., 2025).

In Western academia, relational thinking is arguably on the rise in diverse fields. Scores of scholarly papers and books discuss both the conceptual importance of relational approaches (i.e., their ontology) and how they can manifest in research (i.e., epistemologies and methodologies). In the social sciences and Indigenous studies, the term 'relationality' is often used (e.g., Escobar et al., 2024; Moreton-Robinson, 2016; Tynan, 2020). The disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and geography all contributed to a decade-long 'turn' towards relationality, with its importance recently discussed in the context of sustainability science (Vanhulst & Mancilla García, 2026; West et al., 2020). This work identifies developments, such as systems analysis, that are relational at their cores. In the natural sciences, terms like 'networks' and 'systems', which have been part of ecology for decades, tend to denote relational approaches (Proulx et al., 2005; Raimundo et al., 2018) – and these terms are also widely used in the social sciences (Borgatti et al., 2009; Latour, 1993). Recent advances, especially in computing (Clenet et al., 2026), open new possibilities for the scale and scope of relational approaches that are possible (with open questions about the nuance and depth these approaches can achieve).

These and related research strands provide valuable nuance in understanding relational thinking, and their breadth enables entry points to relational thinking from many disciplines and cultures. Much of this research engages profound questions of why relational thinking is essential, but in this piece, we engage less with deep explanations of the importance of relational thinking. Instead, we focus on what relational thinking 'looks like' in research.

3 | SECTION 2: WHAT RELATIONAL THINKING LOOKS LIKE IN RESEARCH PAPERS

Research can operationalize relational thinking in diverse ways. To aid that operationalization, we build on two recent summaries of relational thinking that offer useful and simple syntheses of decades of scholarship across social and humanities fields. One lays out the tenets of relational approaches (West et al., 2020), and the other focuses on how relational approaches can manifest in empirical work (Eyster et al., 2023). Here, we summarize themes from those papers to offer examples of how we hope 'relational thinking' manifests in *People and Nature* and the field of human–nature relationships more broadly. We discuss nine themes for what relational research can involve (Figure 1) and offer examples of each. We hope this can serve as a starting point for researchers interested in relational thinking. Table 1 summarizes the nine themes and provides examples of each from *People and Nature*.

Three cross-cutting points are relevant to the themes presented. First, relational thinking can manifest throughout the research process—in ontology (i.e., understanding of reality), epistemology (i.e., understanding of how we know what we know), and/or

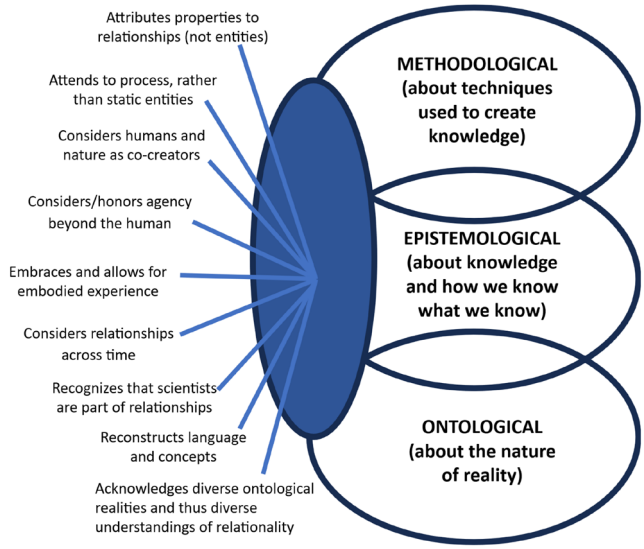

FIGURE 1 Nine themes of relational thinking, which relate to three broad dimensions of relationality (ontology, epistemology, and methodology). The text explains the themes, and Table 1 provides examples of *People and Nature* papers that demonstrate each.

methodology (theory of the techniques used to create knowledge). In particular, relational thinking acknowledges pluralism in all three dimensions – that is, that multiple ways of understanding reality and of studying reality exist. Figure 1 displays our themes and conveys their shared connection to ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Second, incorporating relational thinking into research does not require unconventional methods. Established approaches to create and analyse ecological and social data can contribute to the study of relational phenomena if they involve intentional reflection (individual or collective) and a focus on relationships and interactions (which are, for instance, a foundation of statistical analyses) (Eyster et al., 2023). Third, engagement with relational thinking is immensely diverse and constantly evolving, so any themes and examples can be informative, but never strictly prescriptive.

3.1 | Themes of relational research

Here we describe nine themes that are common in research that embodies relational thinking.

3.1.1 | Attributes properties to relationships (not entities)

Eyster et al. (2023) identify that relational research attributes properties to relationships, rather than to individual entities. This approach connects an action (attribute properties) to a foundational element of relational thinking (processes rather than entities); it shifts attention from individual entities to links between elements of the world (Whitehead, 2010). This approach connects to basic understandings of the challenges with reductionist science's attempts to isolate elements of systems from their interconnections (Lewontin & Levins, 2007). Yet, it moves beyond asking researchers to acknowledge how their study object is embedded in systems; it asks researchers to pay attention less to the entities that often receive most research attention and more to the vibrant, active space that connects those entities.

3.1.2 | Attends to process, rather than static entities

Closely paired with the guidance to 'attribute properties to relationships' is a focus on processes rather than entities. West et al. (2020) identify 'continually unfolding processes' as a research theme associated with the relational turn. This approach encourages attention to those processes themselves: it encourages a focus on interactions and dynamism rather than static individual entities (unlike the previous point, it would not necessarily involve attributing properties to relationships). This approach thus makes more specific and actionable the conceptual focus on process so central to relational thinking (Mesle, 2009; Whitehead, 2010). One specific approach to this type of research, for example, is to explore human–nature relationships through 'adaptive doing', which challenges dominant understandings and explores human–nature collaboration (Rawluk et al., 2020). A focus on process rather than static entities is tightly connected to recognition of agency beyond the human; it is difficult to imagine a process-infused world controlled solely by humans (Latour, 1993).

3.1.3 | Considers co-creation by humans and nature

Nature exists in its hugely diverse forms neither regardless of humans nor entirely due to human action. This approach encourages researchers to look to humans and nature as co-creators of nature – as joint, interacting drivers of the world we know (Eyster et al., 2023). It manifests diverse research that understands humans and nature as co-constituted (as each making up the other) (Descola, 2012; Muraca, 2011), and thus discourages a focus on either humans alone as drivers or of nature as free from human influence. Embedded in this approach is the guidance to not conceptualize humans as separate from nature; instead, the process of humans and nature interacting actively creates 'nature'. This theme relates closely to that of considering and honouring agency beyond the human.

3.1.4 | Acknowledges agency beyond the human

The importance of agency beyond the human infuses the summaries of relational thinking by both West et al. (2020) and Eyster et al. (2023). This approach allows for consideration of agency from a network of relations. Scholarly work discusses this agency

TABLE 1 Approaches to relational research, and examples from *People and Nature*. Elaboration of why each approach embraces relational thinking can be found in the text.

Approach (relational thinking _____:)	Findings from exemplary papers in *People and Nature*	How examples demonstrate relational thinking
Attributes properties to relationships (not entities)	• Dialects of communication between honeyguide birds and humans change with geography (Van Der Wal et al., 2026)	• Studies dialect as a feature of place-dependent bird–human relations
	• There are three common understandings of human–nature relationships in a Brazilian fishing community, as determined by Q-sort (Demasi et al., 2025)	• Inquires specifically after types of human–nature relationship
	• The 'thingified' way rivers are known in the UK is critiqued; it is suggested that rivers should be understood for the reciprocal relationships they have with people (Cohen et al., 2023)	• Argues for why rivers should be understood as relationships, not things
Attends to process, rather than static entities	• Amazonian Indigenous peoples' stories and cosmovisions describe and understand fish migrations in detailed ways that relate to larger processes of transformation and movement across space, time, and worlds (Victoria-Lacy et al., 2025)	• Uses a movement ecology framework to explore the social-ecological significance of migration processes
	• An analytical tool that focuses on processes of societal change (e.g., barriers and facilitators of change) can support future transformative change for nature and people (Mehring et al., 2024)	• Creates an analytical tool to study processes in depth
	• Use of poetry can help to emphasize a processual view of a changing peatland landscape (Heindorf et al., 2024)	• Poetry offers an unconventional 'tool' to allow a process focus
Considers humans and nature as co-creators—joint drivers (not humans alone as drivers). Does not conceptualize humans as separate from nature; instead, humans work together with nature	• Dams create new 'hydrosocial' regimes of relationships between people and water; the river and its cycles interact with dams to create new realities (Boelens et al., 2025)	• Considers human-made dams and the river as co-creating a new river reality
	• Interviews with people who manage roadside areas informs roadside management that recognizes these areas as co-created systems that can benefit biodiversity and the economy (Paikert et al., 2026)	• Acknowledges an area often considered an ecological wasteland as a co-created, biodiversity-supportive space
	• Comparison of stakeholder perceptions of local ecosystem services with scientific assessments reveals synergies and inform policies that maintain desired services (Cunha et al., 2026)	• Treats ecosystem services as in dynamic, constant co-creation by humans and ecosystems
Considers/honours agency beyond the human	• Understanding of domestication, based on Amazonian peoples' knowledge, that places agency with plants and animals in addition to with humans (Cassino et al., 2025)	• Recognizes animals' agency in processes of domestication
	• Treating both animals and humans as active, agentic participants in pastoralist–bear interactions reveals new insight into these dynamics (Ouvrier et al., 2025)	• Understands and explores bears as having agency in their interactions with pastoralists
	• Invasive plant management that recognizes the agency and actions of both plants and people will be more effective (Atchison et al., 2024)	• Considers invasive plants' agency
Embraces and allows for embodied experience	• As humans age, their ability to experience birdsong (detection distance and species distinctions) tends to diminish; this impacts how elderly people experience nature (Unnithan Kumar & Gaston, 2025)	• Acknowledges importance of auditory aspects of nature experience
	• Human landscape governance is driven by a combination of cognition and 'sensed interactions between people and landscapes' (Clark et al., 2025, p. 1653)	• Recognizes embodied experiences ('sensed interactions') as crucial to landscape governance
	• One way that Indigenous corm collectors monitor saltwater intrusion into a wetland is by tasting the water (Jones et al., 2025)	• Acknowledges taste as an environmental monitoring tool

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Approach (relational thinking _____:)	Findings from exemplary papers in *People and Nature*	How examples demonstrate relational thinking
Considers relationships across time	• Study of changing values of feathers—changing relationships with birds spurred changes in fashion and conservation (Kronenberg, 2025)	• Analyses human relationships with birds across time (in one place and time period)
	• Study of loss and revitalization of cultivation of a culturally important vine and its contributions to cultural renewal (Correia et al., 2025)	• Explores a dynamic process of lost and regained relationships
	• Reciprocal relations between fisherpeople and dolphins are taught via social learning; this social learning process has decreased in recent years, and decreased more rapidly in sites more accessible to outsiders (Cantor et al., 2025)	• Catalogues social learning about nature changes over time
Recognizes that scientists are part of relationships (e.g. positionality awareness is important) More participatory methods are thus often appropriate	• Study that finds that flight initiation distance (distance at which a bird flees an oncoming human) differs based on scientists' sex (Morelli et al., 2026)	• Considers scientists' sex as a potential explanatory factor for birds' flight initiation distance
	• Study on ecosystem services scenarios co-production that involves forest manager as not only interviewee but also co-author (Sing et al., 2026)	• Includes a crucial interviewee as a study author to acknowledge overlap in these roles
	• Indigenous stewardship departments and academic researchers co-designed field surveys to assess potential impacts of bryozoans (small invertebrates) on kelp; led to co-developed adaptive management strategies to inform Indigenous governance (Denley et al., 2025)	• Integrated work done by academic researchers and Indigenous stewardship departments
Reconstructs language and concepts (includes renaming and employing metaphor and narrative)	• Study that emphasizes new names for formerly maligned ecosystems based on empirical data—for example, a suggested renaming from 'bog' to 'muddy marvel' (Pratt & Prahalad, 2025)	• Acknowledges a term's negative connotations and offers new identifiers that match sentiments in data
	• Study that foregrounds Indigenous knowledge to acknowledge and honour 'weeds' as part of cultural and ecological systems; suggests care-based approaches that focus on learning from invasive plants (Arnold, 2025)	• Questions identifying plants as weeds and suggests more honour-rich identifiers
	• Study that invited diverse participants to tell their stories about protected areas; led to insights about new alliances and relevant ways to ensure nature protection (Jay et al., 2026)	• Used story to open space for new metaphors
Acknowledges diverse ontological realities and thus diverse understandings of relationality	• Framework for integrating multiple knowledge systems in science-policy processes highlights incommensurable but not incompatible knowledges (Tengö et al., 2026)	• Suggests how to productively engage with diverse ontological perspectives
	• Study suggests that a biocultural approach allows conservation actions in Kenya to align with communities' diverse worldviews, values, and goals (York et al., 2026)	• A relational conservation approach facilitates diverse worldviews to manifest
	• Review shows how Indigenous and contemporary science have different ethical and management frameworks that are entangled and can jointly inform governance (Hird, 2025)	• Argues for plural engagement with different ontologies to improve governance

in many ways, such as understanding nature and humans as kin (Nelson, 2008; Salmon, 2000) and acknowledging non-human agency in actor-network theory (Latour, 2005; Sayes, 2014) and more-than-human approaches (Franklin, 2024). This approach offers one concrete way to operationalize many deep aspects of relational thinking, such as the lack of separation between people and nature and attending to processes rather than entities (because agency leads to action, that is, to processes). One aspect of this approach is that it helps to consider agency beyond cognitive-reflective abilities that are so strong in (though likely not exclusive to) humans. It thus relates closely to the guidance to embrace embodied experience.

3.1.5 | Embraces and allows for embodied experience

Many approaches to relationality foreground the importance of physical, embodied experiences (West et al., 2020). An embodied approach allows for full embrace of multiple kinds of relationships

(not just cognitive, but through diverse senses as well). As part of this expansion, an embodied approach 'offers the possibility of a different kind of biopolitical project, to change the embodied experience of being alive from one of scarcity, supremacy, and separation to one of ease, generosity, and belonging' (Escobar et al., 2024 p. 28). Some argue that embodied practical experiences are uniquely powerful ways to break humans out of the related dualisms of mind/body and human/nature (Escobar et al., 2024). This relates to the crucial importance of our embodied, physical actions in shaping how we think about and understand the world – that is, that what we do shapes how we understand (Cook & Wagenaar, 2012; Maller, 2021; Yunkaporta, 2020). In sum, embodied approaches acknowledge that sensory experience is one foundation of relationality (Abram, 1996).

3.1.6 | Considers relationships across time

Relational approaches recognize process, dynamism, and continual interaction; a one-time-period approach negates the importance of process. One aspect of relational thinking to which this approach connects is the idea of cyclical, as opposed to linear, time. Cyclical time perspectives are common in societies with more relational psychologies, and these perspectives understand time as a series of recurring, revisited relationships (Whyte, 2021). In cyclical time perspectives, 'past, present, and future are connected so that the present is perceived over an extended duration', in what has been called the long-present mindset (Xu et al., 2023, p. 3). Eyster et al. (2023) offer the evolution of the large-seeded avocado to explicate this approach: the avocado, with its unwieldy seed, evolved millennia ago when giant sloths existed to eat avocado fruits and thus disperse the seeds. Present species, they suggest, can thus be understood by reference to not only present, but also past relationships. This approach encourages an embrace of long-timescale processes and continual dynamism, two important elements of relational thinking.

3.1.7 | Recognizes scientists as part of relationships

This approach encourages scientists and scholars to recognize that they cannot be abstracted from relations (Eyster et al., 2023). One clear implication of this is the importance of positionality awareness (and often positionality statements), as these help all involved in the research (including readers) to be able to effectively integrate understanding of relationships into research design, analysis, and interpretation. Though they emerged from the interpretative social sciences, the prevalence of positionality statements is on the rise across the sciences due to recognition of their value under diverse epistemologies (Karhulahti, 2024). Another implication of this approach is that methods that are participatory (in some way) are often appropriate because they recognize the embedded role of researchers as part of the research process–as being in the system of study rather than an outside neutral observer. Participatory methods can take diverse forms but share a focus on reciprocity, exchange, and collective meaning-making; the appropriate approach can be decided based on context and the relationships relevant to research questions.

3.1.8 | Reconstructs language and concepts

West et al. (2020) identify reconstruction of language and concepts as a theme of relational research. This approach identifies the power of language to guide and constrain thinking, and it suggests that one role of relational research can be to offer more relational language to describe important phenomena. The approach encourages both replacement of language that does not recognize relational realities and the use of metaphor and narrative that can help people to think relationally.

Reconstructing language allows for language that better represents relations and helps to foster relational thinking. We offer three examples of the need to replace language that is inaccurately non-relational. The first involves the English word for wind, which represents process as a thing (Elias, 1978; West et al., 2020). Wind cannot exist without movement; wind is not a thing, but a process. Yet in English, wind is a noun—a 'thing' that can blow—which implies that wind could exist without blowing (which of course it cannot). A closely related second example involves words used to describe ecosystems that accord agency to those systems; the word for 'bay' in Potawatomi (a Native American language) is a verb, so in this language an inlet would be described as 'baying'/being a bay (Kimmerer, 2017). The third example involves the representation of complex concepts, such as risk in English. In Bahasa Indonesia, there is no direct translation of the word risk; instead, there are different meanings associated with ways of being and living with natural hazard exposure that differ across local and Indigenous cultural groups and languages. These understandings reframe risk from something to be minimized and feared, to an inherent part of living with nature (Rafliana 2025).

Metaphor and stories are widely recognized as integral to how people make sense of the world; this makes them extremely powerful, and means that it is wise to select them with care (Fish et al., 2024; Raymond et al., 2013). The metaphors we use to describe our relationships with ecosystems can be more and less relational, and those framings may have implications—for instance, understanding nature as a provider of services, as a closed-loop production system, or as an ecocultural community involves very different assumptions and suggested ethics and objectives (Raymond et al., 2013). Stories are especially powerful at conveying relationships because they can effectively frame ecosystem elements as 'meaningful and knowable entities' (Fish et al., 2024 p. 338).

3.1.9 | Acknowledges diverse ontological realities and thus diverse understandings of relationality

Pluralism and relationality are tightly intertwined. Because relationships are almost infinitely variable, acknowledgement of this

variability is, according to many, 'baked into' relational thinking. The theme of plural understandings of the world (i.e., different ontologies in how the world is ordered), and of the relationships that fill those worlds, is thus central to relational thinking (Ban et al., 2026; Escobar, 2018; Tengö et al., 2014, 2017). This theme surfaces more rarely in individual empirical studies (though some studies certainly address it—for example, Ban et al., 2017). Yet, this theme supports the large umbrella of relational research, and means that approaches that foreground relationality (e.g., those that embrace non-dual thinking or human non-separateness from nature) co-exist under the umbrella with approaches wherein relationality is less central (e.g., those that embrace contemporary dualist world views of people and nature as separate). For this reason, this theme interacts strongly with potential traps of relational thinking, especially panacea thinking and incompleteness. It is to these traps that we now turn.

4 | POTENTIAL TRAPS OF RELATIONAL THINKING

Though we clearly see much promise in relational thinking, it is also important to be aware of potential 'traps' that can be associated with it. We see at least five such potential traps: panacea thinking, lip service, relational equals desirable, relational equals qualitative, and incompleteness. We briefly describe each of these below, along with reflections on how to avoid them.

The trap of *panacea thinking* suggests that relationality will solve all problems that currently face research (and beyond). A close corollary of this trap is the assumption that relational approaches are inherently preferable to other ways of framing research questions. Yet, relationality is neither a panacea nor a requirement for quality research. Deep, all-encompassing relationality is not the right framing for every research question or project; more atomistic approaches are better suited in some cases, including cases published in *People and Nature*. For instance, one study compares micronutrient profiles in coral reef fisheries catches to corresponding fish communities to explore how fisheries might address micronutrient deficiencies (Waldock et al., 2025); another study analyses reports of human encounters with Andean bears across South America to summarize available evidence and data gaps (Rojas-VeraPinto et al., 2026). Both studies clearly address human–nature relations (human harvest and consumption of fish and human–bear interactions, respectively) but do not foreground relational thinking in the ways described above; they thus illustrate how valuable research on people–nature relationships can proceed through a range of conceptual and methodological orientations. To avoid the trap of panacea thinking, researchers can intentionally assess the approach that best fits a given research question and context, rather than apply a blanket assumption that relational approaches, or relational approaches of a particular type, should always be used.

The trap of *lip service* involves referring to 'business as usual' activities, topics, or studies as relational, without engagement with the deeper conceptual and methodological dynamics at play. This can result in efforts branded as 'relational' that do not engage with or embody fundamental aspects of relationality. Lip service might occur because (in some circles) relational thinking is respected and sought, and claiming to engage with it might contribute to other goals (e.g., funding acquisition, political power, acceptance, or recognition in academic groups). An example would be a project that claims to engage with relational thinking when it really embodies a belief in separateness (reinforcing ontological dualism of human–nature separateness). To avoid this trap, researchers can be judicious with applying 'relational' terms to their work and ensure that they engage with at least one of the many aspects of relational thinking if they label their work as relational. This may involve challenging their understandings of reality and knowledge.

The trap of *relational equals desirable* (i.e., equation of relationality with desirability) involves a likely unexamined assumption that 'relational equals good'. But relational thinking is not always associated with desirability, just as not all relationships are normatively positive. This can take two forms. First, outcomes of some versions of relational thinking can be associated with undesirable states; strands of relationality can be found in efforts and movements that are associated with injustice, unsustainability, and other outcomes that are undesirable to many. For example, some political movements that focus on relationality among one group tolerate or advocate for gross injustices to other groups; or, strong relations with land can support land uses that are globally unsustainable, such as Amazonian deforestation (Hoelle et al., 2022). Second, not all relations themselves are normatively positive. For example, relations between humans and tigers can be traumatic (tigers can and do kill humans); or, relations between humans and earthquakes can lead to outcomes widely considered undesirable. In the many cases where relationships themselves are not universally positive, there are likely meaningful, positive aspects of those relations—but the relations are multifaceted. It is important to recognize that the relations themselves involve a complex mix of desirable and undesirable elements. Importantly, research observes many relations in the world; a core question of relational thinking is how meaning and value infuse those relations. To avoid this trap, researchers can ensure that they leave space for multifaceted relationships and their meanings—in particular, those potentially associated with undesirable outcomes and those that have both 'positive' and 'negative' elements.

The *relational equals qualitative* trap relates to assumptions that relational thinking requires conducting research in small-scale, embedded ways that produce qualitative data. This assumption likely stems from some of the disciplines and approaches that have most actively promulgated work on relationality – for example, anthropology and critical theory, which indeed often rely on embedded, participatory research methods and qualitative data. Yet, the basic principles of relational thinking transcend specific methods and even epistemologies. In particular, quantitative approaches can be part

of relational research in almost limitless ways. They are, however, somewhat hampered by the defaults in many statistical approaches, which lend themselves most obviously to focus on discrete entities that interact (as opposed to process-focused approaches); indeed, scholars have identified extending relational thinking into statistical and computational methods as an important step (West et al., 2020). Yet, examples abound of research that employs and explores quantitative data using relational thinking—including examples from *People and Nature*. For instance, a study of official symbolic city trees and flowers in China addresses the lack of biocultural diversity in such choices (thus employing relational thinking) via tabulating the diversity (or lack thereof) and distribution of said symbolic choices across the country (Cheng et al., 2025).

The trap of *incompleteness* involves inconsistent or incomplete embrace of relational thinking. Some scholars call this trap ontological slippage—that is, slipping out of relational ontologies, or ways of understanding reality (Escobar et al., 2024). The trap of incompleteness occurs when relational thinking occurs sporadically in a project, thus creating inconsistencies. For example, a scholar might at one point frame a system as emergent through relations (e.g., via the relational ontological claim that human societies emerge from non-separate human–environment relations), but then describe or treat the system as comprised of separate or stable entities (e.g., position distinct social groups and nature areas as bounded or spatially separate entities in empirical analysis) (Friedman et al., 2022). Another example would be to recognize a claim that there is a plurality of ways of being and knowing the world, only to later make universal claims framing the problem and solution.

This final 'trap' of incompleteness is particularly thorny for interdisciplinary research – it could manifest, or be operationalized, as not accepting hybrid approaches. We recognize that this incompleteness occurs extensively, and in hugely diverse ways, in interdisciplinary research, often due to the constraints, limitations, or standards (depending on framing) of some of the disciplines involved. One helpful step to avoid (or minimize) this trap can be explicitness about these limitations and tensions— for instance, clear recognition of where methods may have desired benefits, but come with costs of full adherence to relational thinking (Raymond et al., 2021; West et al., 2021). Because the expansion of relational thinking is an active research area—and thus we do not yet know all of the ways relational thinking is manifesting and can manifest in the future—we see this trap as an active area of interdisciplinary scholarly development. It is more of an active concern than a 'trap'.

5 | CONCLUSION

The ability to study and make decisions that address connections between people and nature is critical for achieving global biodiversity and sustainability goals (Friedman et al., 2022; Obura et al., 2026) and for navigating challenges of social and ecological justice. Ultimately, the transformative change needed to address ongoing (and accelerating) environmental crises depends on recognizing and engaging with these interconnections. Many global bodies foreground these interconnections: the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) conceptual framework that underpins all IPBES assessments implicitly recognizes the importance of the interlinkages between people and nature (Díaz et al., 2015); the IPBES Transformative Change Assessment identifies recognition and prioritization of interconnections as a primary strategy of transformative change toward sustainability (IPBES, 2025); and the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework targets recognize that embracing human–nature links is vital (Friedman et al., 2022). Underlying the present paper is the belief that relational approaches underpin important tools that allow us to explore these connections in new (yet possibly also timeless) ways.

We thus wish to close this piece with a reflection on ambiguity. West et al. (2020), in their discussion of relationality in sustainability science, offer an important discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of ambiguity. Ambiguity has at least two important drawbacks. One is the danger of an 'anything goes' mentality—the danger 'that the term 'relational' rapidly becomes a buzzword used to justify very different approaches' (West et al., 2020, p. 318). The second is that relationality becomes relegated to social sciences—understood as relevant to only human concerns. This is a problem for many reasons, not least of which because separating social and natural science is counter to relational thinking. We hope that this paper can help to avoid these pitfalls, and allow for the promise and potential of ambiguity.

Ambiguity also has numerous game-changing advantages. One is flexibility; ambiguity allows for fluidity and inclusivity in understandings. This is crucial for a journal like *People and Nature* and a concept like relationality. There exist thousands of potential directions for relational research, and we encourage scholars to explore opportunities of new connections and integrations. Examples include uses of additional practices to operationalize relational thinking, ecological investigations that apply relational thinking to human–nature interactions, and cross-worldview collaborations in relationality. We hope that this piece, by making clear our shared understanding of relational thinking at this time, helps create more transparency and thus spurs people to react to and build on that understanding with new developments and new insights.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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