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# Nature is dead. Nature remains dead. And we have killed it

By Emmanuel Oboh



Deluded : Our belief in our superiority over other life forms is a mistake; we destroy the natural world with our 'intelligence'. Photo: Delwyn Verasamy

One of the most well-known quotes by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche begins with the statement, "God is dead," from his 1882 work, *The Gay Science*.

Quoted at length it reads: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?”

A reading of the quote suggests that an analogy can be drawn between the “God” Nietzsche refers to and the current degraded state of nature. Simply substituting the word “God” with “nature” underscores the severity of the present environmental crisis.

“God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?”

In a similar vein, nature is dead. Nature remains dead. And we have killed it.

The environmental crisis we face today is one in which, through our daily actions, we continue to inflict profound harm on the natural world. The cumulative effect of human activity on the environment, now termed the Anthropocene, can be traced back to the early periods of “civilisation” and industrialisation. In other words, since those times, humanity has been — and continues to be — responsible for the death of nature.

Despite numerous calls to action and a growing body of work by environmental philosophers and activists, only modest progress has been made, and much more remains to be desired. We are all complicit in this death. “How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?”

Too often, we attempt to console ourselves by adopting seemingly sustainable lifestyles, while ignoring the deeper structures that perpetuate environmental destruction. By structures here, I refer to, among others, capitalism and patriarchy. The persistent failure to implement effective environmental policies — either to avoid disrupting “development” (capitalism) or to preserve the interests of a privileged few, predominantly white, heterosexual, male elites (patriarchy) — testifies to our collective unwillingness to confront the root causes of environmental degradation.

We busy ourselves with addressing symptoms rather than the structural causes we are reluctant to face. This highlights the superficial comfort we derive from “doing something towards mitigation”, even as the foundations of the crisis remain intact.

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There is little doubt that nature is the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has ever possessed. No matter how humans attempt to justify their status as “masters of the universe” — whether through intellectual capacity or advances in science and technology — none of these so-called achievements would have been possible without nature. We depend on nature not only for our basic sustenance but also for the resources that enable our scientific and technological advancements. Without nature, we are nothing.

Yet, time and again, we focus on traits we value in our own species and extrapolate from them a supposed superiority over the rest of the natural world. We rarely cite, for instance, the keen vision of an eagle as evidence that the eagle is superior to humans, or the incredible speed of a cheetah as proof that the cheetah is greater than us. Instead, we highlight intelligence — a trait we prize within our own species — and from this narrow vantage point, proclaim ourselves better than the wider natural world, of which we are but a small — and often highly destructive — part.

I recognise that the analysis I offer here is a simplified account compared to the more nuanced debates in the broader literature on human superiority over nature. Nevertheless, it serves to illustrate the deep-seated bias we harbour as a species: a bias that blinds us to the consequences of our actions, to our own ultimate detriment in the grand order of things.

The knives with which we continue to bleed nature are the very structures we uphold as emblems of our so-called civilisation: patriarchy and capitalism. These structures, along with other forms of systemic oppression — various “isms” often used to justify the exploitation of both marginalised peoples and the natural world — are entrenched as markers of “development” or “progress”, making them difficult to challenge or dismantle.

“What water is there for us to clean ourselves?”

This is where theories such as deep ecology, social ecology, ecofeminism and ecowomanism become crucial. These frameworks challenge us to recognise that social and ecological justice are fundamentally intertwined. They illuminate the reality that the same structures which sustain social injustices among humans are also responsible for the ongoing injustice inflicted upon nature — and vice versa. Thus, if we are to cleanse ourselves of our transgressions against the Earth, we must also work to dismantle the systems that perpetuate social injustice.

“What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?” This question evokes the growing movement within environmental philosophy to seek non-Western approaches to mitigating environmental degradation and promoting sustainability. The dominant, Western-centric models for addressing environmental crises are largely rooted in environmental science. But scientific approaches, while valuable, can be limited, because they often rely on controlled experiments that fail to capture the unpredictable and complex realities of environmental degradation as it occurs in the world.

This is where art — and particularly the art forms embedded in non-Western traditions — offers crucial contributions to the discourse on environmental crisis mitigation and sustainability. Many non-Western approaches to environmental stewardship are grounded in generations of lived experience with nature as it truly is, passed down through oral traditions, songs, dances, taboos, totems and other artistic expressions. Yet, these forms of ecological knowledge have often been marginalised by science and technology, and many are now at risk of being lost forever.

Because these ways of knowing are born from long-term, direct experience with the natural world, they hold insights and wisdom that could prove invaluable in the struggle against environmental degradation. It is imperative that we recognise, preserve and learn from these traditions rather than allowing them to be silenced in the name of progress.

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Every day, headlines celebrate new scientific achievements: a successful cloning here, a breakthrough in life extension there, and elsewhere, experiments exploring the fusion of human and machine to enhance human capabilities. While these are remarkable feats, they seem to miss a crucial point. If the essence of human life is merely to persist — regardless of its quality — then perhaps such advancements are sufficient. But what would life be without the healing presence of non-human nature?

In our relentless pursuit of greatness — striving to become godlike — we have neglected what truly sustains and enriches us. A Native American proverb offers a sobering warning: “Only when the last tree has been cut down, the last fish caught and the last stream poisoned, will we realise we cannot eat money.”

I therefore conclude: Nature is dead. Nature remains dead. And we have killed it. In our striving to transcend the limits of our humanity, we have forsaken the very foundation upon which our existence depends. In our pursuit to become gods, we have severed ourselves from the sacred web of life, forgetting that our greatness is meaningless in a barren and broken world.

The death of nature is not merely an ecological event — it is a profound existential crisis, a mirror reflecting the collapse of the human spirit itself. Until we recognise that our fate is inextricably bound to the fate of the Earth, all our triumphs will be hollow victories.

In the end, the question remains: if we have killed what was holiest and mightiest among us, what is left within us worth saving?

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<https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/opinion/2025-05-04-nature-is-dead-nature-remains-dead-and-we-have-killed-it/>

I imagine Emmanuel has heard this before, but if the decolonization initiative is to escape the past, why resort to quoting Nietzsche? But I quibble. Emmanuel can “master” Nietzsche too as a guy “pissing from inside the tent” (sort of). If one is an African “Ph.D. of philosophy at the Centre of Applied Ethics at Stellenbosch University” this is what you will see, feel, and write. No shame. A summation (to date?). A contribution we should not discount. TJB