The paradox alluded to in this extract concerns (i) the appreciation that our framing devices actually create aesthetic experience, in much the same way as a simple picture frame, in counterpart to (ii) the intuitive appreciation of nature's aesthetic, holistic value (beauty) as being essentially unframed. Ronald Moore's suggestion that we regard frames as references of focus rather than confinement prompts questions regarding how we frame what matters in environmental responsibility. In his conclusion, Moore makes reference to the influential American educational reformer and philosophical pragmatist John Dewey (1859–1952), an influence evident particularly in the development of environmental pragmatism (Reading 13).

Introduction
A standard feature of most artworks that contributes importantly to our aesthetic experience of them is the frame. A traditional easel painting is bounded by a frame that sets limits on our range of visual attention and makes it possible to see the contents within it as intelligibly organized. Even unframed paintings are bounded by their canvas edges. Similarly, dramas, operas, dances, and various other performances are framed by the confines of their theatrical context (the proscenium arch, the amphitheater setting, the architectural backdrop of the Baths of Caracalla, etc.). Analogously, works of literature may be seen as framed by their covers, works of music by the temporal limits on their performance, sculptures by the dimensions of their material form, and so on. By contrast with all of these, however, nature can seem strikingly and importantly unframed. When I admire the display of stars in a desert night sky, for example, there is no boundary that guides or limits my perception except the extreme boundary of the visual horizon (and that turns out to be no boundary at all, provided I am willing to travel far enough). When I wander through a forest, finding this or that of its myriad features beautiful, I am not conscious of any frame that organizes them. Even if, for a moment, I notice the way the path opens upon a lovely mountain vista, caught between dense shrubbery and overhanging limbs, in the next moment I
am free to walk through this apparent frame into a never-ending sequence of changing scenes. The same limitlessness of objective and malleability of perception characterize our aesthetic experience of nature from the microscopic to the telescopic scale, and from the wilderness setting to the urban setting. Art is framed, and nature is not.

But is this really so? The claim that nature – or our experience of nature – is importantly and distinctively unframed is an entrenched dogma [...] 

**Nature framed**

[...] We habitually organize parts and wholes in our experience, whether we are dealing with natural objects or artifacts. The part-and-whole sorting is done through words and concepts. This is a that. This goes in that file. No one calls it that; we call it this. And so on. We don’t live life as a vast undifferentiated panorama of experience. We frame what we experience as we go along. Framing is an important and inevitable aspect of our common human endeavor to make experience intelligible. The worker in the automobile factory has to frame his particular methodical procedure to make it sensible to him as part of the larger operation. The minister charged with coming up with a sermon every week has to frame her ideas in a way that will be received by her parishioners as a coherent message. The lawyer defending his client’s interests must frame an argument that will win over the jury.

My point is that framing in the aesthetic sense is a lot different from framing in the physical sense. Frames around pictures are simply emblems of the wider business of framing that we engage in all the time. If I see the thistle-head as a thistle-head rather than as a miscellaneous weed or as a piece of trash, that will be because I can call up a category, or frame, within which I can regard it. The categories Kendall Walton identified as importantly determinative of our aesthetic judgments about art are examples of the carving-up process that is involved in all aesthetic experience (see Walton, 1970, pp. 334–67). But they are not the most prevalent examples. Many of the ways we isolate natural objects for aesthetic regard are inarticulate. Some natural objects we deem beautiful are bounded by their names. This, for example, is a beautiful gladiolus. And it is beautiful as a gladiolus. It isn’t a lily, and wouldn’t be beautiful as a lily. So, the very classification into which the object falls puts us in a position to decide what features count toward its being correctly deemed beautiful. But many other natural objects of aesthetic attention are not bounded by names or categories. The gentle pit-a-pat of water dripping from dozens of springlets into a narrow gorge. The odd soft-hard feel
of tiny zeolite crystals in the fissure of a sea-ledge. The way silhouetted forms interplay and overlap in a forested horizon at twilight. Odd catches of sea-marsh fragrance. The taste left by a weed stem one has been idly chewing on. And so on and on. Even if we should agree that it is an aesthetic mistake and a denigration of nature to think of environmental beauty as nothing other than a series of scenes, framed and composed for our enjoyment as quasi-artworks, we needn’t deny that we often gather together the elements of our experience of nature into wholes as a way of focusing attention on them, experiencing them against their background. Sometimes this does amount to looking at nature in the way we look at art. Sometimes it doesn’t. The occasional act of seeing a mountain setting as the very thing that might make for a great landscape painting is no more injurious to our sense of the beauty of the natural environment than the occasional act of thinking how much a certain birdsong is like one of the recorder parts in a Telemann quartet. [...] 

The business of setting boundaries [...] can be accomplished in a great many ways. The most obvious, of course, is the way the landscape painter employs when she holds up an empty frame, or her hands, determining that just this much and no more will be the range of her aesthetic attention. This is a familiar means of converting the experience of unorganized natural phenomena into scenery, or a scene. But we are also selecting a range of objects for aesthetic attention and setting boundaries when we simply decide that this cloud mass and not that, this tree and not that, this section of the pond surface and not that is what we want to have as the focus of our experience. When we do this, scene and scenery may be the last things in our minds. We want to take aesthetic stock of the natural objects that capture our attention, and nothing more.

How do we do it? We draw upon memory, imagination, and our culturally acquired capacity to direct attention in such a way as to put some things in the foreground of awareness and others in the background. A fern frond can be made to stand out from a crowd of similar fronds on a cliff face just by deciding to pay close attention to it and not the others. One could equally decide to pay attention to a cluster of five fronds, or only to their stalks, or to the way they are swaying in the breeze, or the intensity of the color in their veins. In deliberate acts of selective attention, we informally frame and reframe natural objects of sensory awareness all the time. Not every informal act of framing, of course, will produce an aesthetic experience. The frame is only a precondition of the processes of reflection and delection that can take place within it.

[...] ‘A landscape to be seen has to be composed’ (Santayana, 1936, p. 101). The subtle truth behind this gnomic statement is that some
measure of bounding and interpretation is needed if the observer is to turn the restless, endless sensory field into appreciable wholes. Here we may wish to recall that Aristotle, who never spoke of the beauty of landscapes, insisted that the possibility of beauty turns on the concept of limitation. Limit, as he saw it, is what makes it possible to take natural objects as wholes, so that their parts may be regarded as composed, or not. If well composed, according to the canons of suitability specific to it, a natural object might be beautiful, and otherwise not. Drawing on this thought, we can generalize the point Santayana was making: To be seen as beautiful, a natural object has to be composed. And to be composed, it must be bounded, so that its parts can be parts of a whole.

Carlson’s (2000) attack on what he calls the ‘scenery cult’ portrays its proponents as busy converting raw environmental beauty into framed scenes that charm in the way picture postcards charm, by articulating what is essentially limitless into compositions whose formal characteristics (balance, unity, etc.) can then be admired. In his most compelling illustration of this mistake, a guest in a cabin with a picture window looks out upon a mountain-ringed lake and admires what he sees encompassed by the window-frame as a splendid scene. But, by moving back into the cabin, he can spoil the effect of the ‘picture’ by adopting a perspective from which the characteristic of balance is lost as the top of a mountain is lopped off by the frame, as in a bad snapshot. To get the beauty straight and free from forced composition, all he has to do is step outside the cabin and look about (see Carlson, 2000, p. 36). But look about and see what? It seems to me that, outside the cabin, the guest is indeed freer to look first here and then there, taking stock of this and then that aspect of his surroundings. Yet, if he is to see beauty in nature (and not just gather a general sense of the beauty of nature), he may well see it as inhering in a beautiful something – a thing, a feature of a thing, a combination of features, or the interplay of some features with others. And for there to be a something there to see, some limitation of his awareness must be imposed.

It is not, contrary to what Carlson suggests, simply to facilitate awareness of formal qualities in nature (which he thinks are destined to be a relatively insignificant aspect of aesthetic appreciation of the environment in any case) that the guest in front of the cabin will frame, or focus, his awareness as he looks at the mountains, the lake, and so on. Rather, he must do something of this sort in order to see what he sees as anything at all, let alone as a possible subject of beauty. One can imagine him gazing out at the natural splendor and saying under his breath ‘how beautiful!’ This exclamation is overheard by another guest, who asks,
‘What is beautiful?’ To which he responds ‘Well, all of this,’ sweeping his arm before him. But gestures of this kind are notoriously ambiguous and uninformative. So his companion presses him for clarification. ‘Do you mean the mountain? The lake? The play of light on the water? What, exactly?’ And at this point we have reached a crucial fork in the theoretic road. If we go in one direction, the inarticulate gestures continue, and there cannot be any prospect of communicating the character or content of his aesthetic experience to his correspondent. In this case the most we can say is that the beauty he perceives seems to be out there in a general perfusion of the sensible environment. If we go in the other direction, he considers just what feature or features of the sensible environment present themselves as beautiful – not, or not only, scenic, but beautiful. And in that case, he will abandon the frameless awareness indicated by the sweep of his arm in favor of a more focused, more considered judgment about what counts in a particular beauty judgment. The first path preserves the sense that natural beauty is best understood as unframed, but it does so at the cost of focus and communicability. The second path embraces the idea that beauty judgments require some form of limitation or focal conspectus to make them comprehensible, but it does so at the cost of the dynamic, engaged appreciation of a limitless environment.

**The paradox and its resolution**

The paradox of framing derives from the tension that this divergence of paths engenders. We can formulate it this way: On the one hand, it seems that nothing can be comprehended as an object of appreciation unless it is framed or bounded in some way. On the other hand, it seems that appreciative experience of natural environments requires the dissolving and penetrating of all boundaries in favor of a dynamic and engaged experience. Thus, in one sense, frames seem indispensable to aesthetic experience as a precondition of comprehensible appreciation while, in another, they seem destined to impair proper regard for natural beauty, converting limitless sensible subjects into mere scenes or compositions.

The usual strategy for resolving paradoxes involves taking a closer look at apparently incompatible premises to see whether they really do imply what they are usually taken to imply. If it can be shown that the way in which the premises are formulated disguises ambiguities or possibilities of reinterpretation, then re-reading the premises in one way rather than another does away with their apparent incompatibility. That is exactly how we need to resolve the framing paradox. The source of the problem, as I see it, lies in an overly narrow conception of ‘frame’ that has been
assumed throughout the debate. Both framists and anti-framists speak of frames as enclosing their aesthetic contents and helping to compose those contents, making possible an appreciation of their balance, unity, harmony, and so on. Framists think this a virtue. Anti-framists think it a vice, at least as it is applied to nature. But neither side fully appreciates the nuanced way in which the other deals with the line between inside and outside.

Although it is certainly true that picture frames facilitate form appreciation in a way that is relatively rigid and impermeable, our experience of paintings, for example, often penetrates the frame by taking stock of undisclosed elements that are part of the painting as much as is the paint on the canvas. To take an obvious example, a proper appreciation of most medieval paintings will require familiarity with the iconographic code that lends significance to some of their elements. That code is not within the frame; it is instead a part of the work that the framed composition calls up. The aesthetic experience one may have in contemplating such a painting – the beauty one might find in it, say – is focused, but not confined, by the frame. And the same is true of many other features of paintings in all periods and places. Irony, parody, homage, political message, and so on, are important parts of artworks not presented on their framed surface. Nor are such elements of response as the way in which a particular painting resonates with recent world events. Or the way it unintentionally echoes work done in another age or place. Or the way its display in a particular museum space creates harmony or tension between it and other paintings, and so on. Yet all of these factors can properly contribute to one’s aesthetic experience of the painting as it is presented.

The same contrast between focus and confinement is obviously true of other artistic media as well. The novels we most want to read are those that refuse to stay resolutely within their covers. When we buy tickets to watch plays, we hope and expect our experience will transcend the limits of the stage to connect up with other valuable things in our lives. And the same is obviously true of dance, opera, sculpture, gardens, and other artforms. Even though the various ways in which works in all of these artforms are framed do the important work of focusing our regard on a definite this to be appreciated, it is nearly never the artist’s intent to restrict the audience’s attention to what is displayed within the frame.

In the natural environment, the notion of what is framed and what is not is equally malleable. [...] [The] fortunate propensity of nature to stimulate our imaginations profitably is an asset bestowed on it by its unframedness (Hepburn,
Artworks are, relatively speaking, bound in their meaning by the frames and interpretive guides and the like that explain what those frames compose. But I am suggesting that this way of putting things both overstates the controlling function of the frame in art and understates the attention-focusing function of informal framing devices in our experience of nature. [...] 

If we think of framing simply as concentration of attention within limits – not concerning ourselves with the question of the potential of those limits to control the elements it confines into a composition – we must concede that every aesthetic experience of nature is framed. It is framed because it depends first and foremost upon the senses, and each of these has a limited range. It is easy to make too much of this condition. This sort of framing is a limitation that is, like many other essentially human limitations, generally indiscernible in the conduct of life. But it is also easy to make too little of it. Whether one is standing outside the cabin looking at the vast panorama or standing within it looking through the window, one is looking at what is necessarily only a selection from the great inventory of natural phenomena. It obviously follows that nature as a whole cannot be appreciated aesthetically, and that we are therefore stuck with finding beauty, sublimity, etc., in parts of nature rather than in a limitless and therefore insensible whole. To this plain fact of limitation, we may add the fact that our limited capacities of attention and comprehension, let alone culturally inculcated limitations on what we may become aware of, inevitably circumscribe our ability to experience natural phenomena. This conclusion flies in the face of at least the most ambitious forms of ‘aesthetic integralism,’ the notion that natural beauty emerges when, and only when, we regard the whole of nature (just as the beauty of a poem emerges when, and only when, we regard the whole of the poem). [...] 

In the end, the framing controversy is about the variety of limits on attention. Everyone admits that our sensory exposure to the world is limited and that our way of making sense of, or appreciating, the world to which we are exposed is also limited. Not only are the limits inevitable, they are basic conditions of the intelligibility of our sensory world. One person walks along a mountain path turning his head this way and that, listening to the wind, smelling the faint fragrance of high pine needles, feeling the gusts of frigid air on his cheeks. His awareness of all these natural qualities is informally framed, re-framed, and re-framed again as he continues his hike. If his sensory experience were utterly unframed it would be chaotic and unintelligible. Certainly it would be unappreciable. Another person peers through a microscope to examine...
a volvox colony. She locates it in a dense biotic soup of other animate and inanimate matter, and she isolates it for attention simply by seeing it as a volvox colony, taking its physical limits as the limits of her regard, and pushing all the rest of what appears in her optical field into the background. She has framed the volvox colony for attention – and if she finds it aesthetically interesting, as a potential focus of aesthetic experience, she does so simply by allowing one set of frames (names and physical dimensions of the named objects) to subend the larger frames of sensory awareness. A third person stops in the course of clearing a debris-clogged gutter to admire the way the oil-runoff, surface froth, and slow-moving mud are catching the low-angled winter light to produce a luminous, rhythmic swirl. As he gathers this in, he turns to his fellow laborer and, looking through his hands with thumbs at right angles, says, ‘I wish I had a camera!’

I would insist that each of these persons (and of course the roster of similar examples could be indefinitely extended) is in a position to have an aesthetic experience involving a natural object, and hence to be in a position to appreciate natural beauty (or other natural aesthetic qualities). [...] Appreciation doesn’t just rove endlessly and haphazardly across the sensory panorama. It must be trained on this or that, focused by our interest in taking in objects or qualities in various assortments. We can’t help limiting our experience of nature by selecting various objects for attention at various times.

Taking an aesthetic interest in a particular natural object is an act of selective attention occurring within other selections of attention that don’t disappear in the moment of particular appreciation. They just become temporarily extraneous to the appreciation at hand. [...] 

Conclusion

[...] [T]he framing paradox is easily resolved in the context of appreciative practice. If by ‘frame’ what is really implied is the selection of this or that object or constellation of objects for aesthetic attention, rival claims about nature being framed and unframed can be seen as no more than variable markers on the endless scale of aesthetic selectivity. To frame a piece of the vast environmental whole need not be to convert the selected portion into a quasi-artwork. At one point on the scale, it can be to do precisely what the conceptualists like Allen Carlson and Marcia Eaton have said we should do, namely to regard natural things as what they are, employing the appropriate categories of natural science. Categories of this sort function quite ably as frames, locating what it is that we are observing and presenting it as an integral object against its
larger background. Names are also frames. To see the dandelion as a dandelion is to use its name to draw its qualities into focal awareness. At another point on the scale, to frame a natural object can be to form a nameless experiential conceptus rather than a scene or nature-portrait. In such a coalescence of awareness, whatever composition occurs should not be thought of as a forced integration of component elements, but rather as a realization of their relations in a situation of focused aesthetic awareness. In a way, this view is simply an application to the context of natural objects of the central point of John Dewey's doctrine of aesthetic value. Dewey, it will be recalled, maintained that aesthetic value of any kind emerges in the course of converting undifferentiated experience into experiences. Experiences are, in his account, units, or wholes of lived awareness with distinctive beginnings, middles, and ends. Dewey's way of putting the point has seemed to his latter-day critics to put too much emphasis on organic unity. But his fundamental assertion that aesthetic value invariably arises out of experiences rendered whole and comprehensible by being articulated, i.e., by being separated out from the run of the rest of experience by acts of focal attention, correctly and powerfully expresses the importance of framing in aesthetic living. [...]