Proceedings of ICIHCS 2026 Symposium: Alternate Narratives and Cross-Cultural Visions in a Globalized World
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT39470

Conceptual Boundaries of Ecological Literature and Ecological Consciousness as a Criterion for Its Identification

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Abstract. With the rapid development of scholarship on ecological literature in China, increasing attention has been devoted to the conceptual boundaries of ecological literature. Currently, some studies tend to adopt an overly broad definition of ecological literature; for example, works are classified as ecological literature merely because they feature natural landscapes, environmental descriptions, or depictions of the relationship between humans and nature, without sufficiently examining the functions of these elements within the overall structure of the text or whether the works demonstrate a clear and sustained ecological consciousness. Based on this issue, this paper discusses the conceptual boundaries of ecological literature, focusing on whether "ecological consciousness" can serve as a key criterion for identifying works of ecological literature. Combining conceptual analysis with textual comparison, this paper selects representative literary works to compare the different manifestations of natural landscapes, environmental descriptions, and the relationship between humans and nature within them, and further examines the role of ecological consciousness in the works' themes, narrative structures, and value orientations. The research aims to distinguish between general nature writing and literary expressions imbued with ecological consciousness, further clarify the conceptual boundaries of ecological literature, and explore the feasibility of ecological consciousness as a criterion for identifying ecological literature, thereby providing a theoretical framework to help reduce the overgeneralization of the concept of ecological literature.

Keywords: Ecological literature, ecological consciousness, conceptual boundaries, conceptual overgeneralization, nature writing

1. Introduction

In "An Overview of Research on Ecological Literature in China (2020–2024)," Cao reviewed the current development of ecological literature studies in China and pointed out that related research still lacks clarity in distinguishing between the concepts of "ecological literature" and "ecological consciousness" [1]. In some studies, works are classified as ecological literature solely because they contain natural landscapes, animals, rural settings, or other forms of "nature writing," while insufficient attention is paid to the specific functions of these elements and to whether the works demonstrate a clear, sustained, and structurally embedded ecological consciousness. Such an approach tends to conflate "nature writing" with "ecological literature." Existing research has

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT39470

examined ecological literature, nature literature, environmental literature, and ecological consciousness from various perspectives; however, clear criteria for distinguishing between "literary works that can be interpreted through ecological criticism" and "works that truly belong to the category of ecological literature" remain underdeveloped.

Accordingly, this paper focuses on the conceptual boundaries of ecological literature, with particular attention to the distinction between ecological literature and general nature writing and to whether ecological consciousness can serve as a key criterion for determining whether a literary work belongs to this category. Methodologically, the paper combines literature review, conceptual analysis, and textual comparison to organize existing definitions of ecological literature and related research on ecological consciousness, while selecting representative literary works for comparative analysis. It aims to clarify the conceptual boundaries of ecological literature, reduce conceptual generalization in ecological literature studies, and provide more explicit and operational criteria for identifying and analyzing works of ecological literature.

2. Conceptual boundaries of ecological literature

2.1. Basic definition of ecological literature

Ecological literature is not simply defined by the presence of natural landscapes, animals, or environmental descriptions. Compared with the portrayal of nature in general literary works, ecological literature places greater emphasis on the relationship between humans and nature, ecological consciousness, and ecological values. Its core lies not merely in whether nature is described, but in how the work interprets nature, addresses the human-nature relationship, and reflects these concerns in its thematic structure and value expression.

Wang points out that ecological literature typically draws on ecological holism as a key ideological foundation, focusing on the interests of the ecological whole and using literature to reflect on the relationship between humans and nature, as well as the social, cultural, and ethical roots of ecological crises [2]. Lu discusses the relationship between nature and literature and ecological criticism from the perspective of ecological aesthetics, emphasizing that literature should not merely depict nature but should also promote a renewed understanding of the human-nature relationship through aesthetic and value dimensions [3]. Wang's research further points out that ecological consciousness is not merely a depiction of nature, but encompasses an understanding of nature's value, reflection on the relationship between humans and nature, and attention to ecological ethical issues [4].

Synthesizing these perspectives, this paper argues that ecological literature can be examined from three interrelated dimensions. First, nature should not exist merely as a backdrop, symbol, or aesthetic object, but should possess a relatively independent value within the text. Second, the work should demonstrate a sustained and explicit focus on the relationship between humans and nature. Finally, a relatively clear ecological consciousness should be reflected in the work's theme, narrative structure, or value judgments. Therefore, the identification of ecological literature cannot rely solely on the presence of natural imagery or environmental descriptions; rather, it should also consider the role of ecological consciousness within the work and its connection to the theme and value expression.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT39470

2.2. Conceptual distinctions between ecological literature and nature writing

Nature writing and ecological literature are closely related, but they should not be treated as equivalent. Nature writing generally refers to the depiction of mountains, rivers, plants, animals, and the natural environment in literary works. Such depictions may serve multiple functions, including setting the mood, expressing characters' emotions, constructing symbolic meaning, or conveying the work's sense of life. Therefore, the presence of nature writing does not necessarily mean that a work possesses the characteristics of ecological literature.

In contrast, ecological literature places greater emphasis on the text's exploration of the relationship between humans and nature. In such works, nature is not merely a backdrop or an object to be observed or exploited; it often possesses a relatively independent value. Works may depict the interdependence, conflict, destruction, or symbiotic relationships between humans and nature, and through these relationships, express particular ecological value judgments. Therefore, identifying ecological literature should not stop at whether natural descriptions are present, but should examine the function of nature within the text and whether the work develops a sustained and explicit ecological consciousness.

This distinction also implies that the scope of nature writing is broader than that of ecological literature. Ma's discussion of conceptions of nature in contemporary poetry indicates that nature writing may involve various intellectual dimensions, such as the spirit of life and reflections on civilization; therefore, it cannot be directly equated with modern ecological expression merely because of the presence of natural imagery [5]. Many classical poems, rural novels, travel literature, and even love poems contain abundant depictions of natural scenery, but these natural images may primarily serve lyrical, symbolic, or narrative functions. For example, landscapes in poetry may simply project characters' emotions, while rural scenery may serve as a backdrop for creating a nostalgic atmosphere. If a text does not further explore the intrinsic value of nature or engage in sustained reflection on the relationship between humans and nature, classifying it as ecological literature based solely on its depictions of nature risks conceptual overgeneralization.

Therefore, this paper argues that the most significant distinction between nature writing and ecological literature lies not in whether a work depicts nature, but in whether nature enters the work's core value structure. Nature writing can be an important form of expression within ecological literature, but it is not, by itself, sufficient to determine whether a work belongs to this category. Only when nature moves beyond the role of a mere backdrop, symbol, or aesthetic object and forms a sustained connection with the work's themes, value judgments, and representation of the human-non-human relationship can the work reasonably be considered part of ecological literature.

3. The overgeneralization of ecological literature

3.1. Equating nature writing with ecological consciousness

In some studies of ecological literature, descriptions of nature are directly regarded as manifestations of ecological consciousness. As long as landscapes, land, plants, animals, or rural settings appear in a work, it may be labeled as "ecological literature." However, descriptions of nature are, in themselves, merely forms of textual expression. They may serve various functions, including aesthetic, symbolic, lyrical, narrative, or cultural memory functions, and do not necessarily indicate ecological consciousness.

The key distinction between ecological consciousness and descriptions of nature lies in the fact that the former involves value judgments and an awareness of relationships. Descriptions of nature

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typically concern what aspects of nature are depicted and what functions they serve, whereas ecological consciousness concerns how the work interprets nature, including whether nature possesses intrinsic value, how humans understand nature, and how the relationship between humans and nature is represented. If a text merely uses nature to express characters' emotions, life experiences, or memories of the homeland, its abundant natural imagery does not necessarily indicate a clear ecological consciousness.

This issue is particularly evident in classical and modern poetry. For example, Tao Yuanming's poetry contains abundant pastoral, mountainous, and agricultural imagery; however, whether these elements embody a reclusive persona, a philosophy of life, a pastoral aesthetic, or ecological consciousness in the modern sense requires further distinction [6]. Hai Zi's poetry similarly employs abundant natural imagery, including the earth, wheat fields, villages, and the sun, but these images often serve functions such as expressing an awareness of life and critiquing modernity [7]. Therefore, the frequent appearance of natural imagery alone is insufficient to determine whether such works belong to ecological literature and may obscure their actual ideological core.

Consequently, descriptions of nature can serve as a means of expressing ecological consciousness, but they cannot automatically be regarded as ecological consciousness itself. Determining whether a work possesses ecological consciousness requires further examination of whether its depiction of nature is connected to its core themes and value structure and whether it offers a sustained and explicit reflection on the relationship between humans and nature. Equating descriptions of nature with ecological consciousness is therefore a primary source of conceptual overgeneralization in ecological literature studies.

3.2. Major manifestations of conceptual overgeneralization

The overgeneralization of ecological literature is primarily manifested in the relaxation of classificatory criteria and the blurring of boundaries between related concepts. Natural elements are often directly treated as evidence of ecological attributes: a work may be classified as ecological literature simply because it features landscapes, animals, rural settings, land, or seasonal changes. The fundamental problem lies in confusing nature writing with ecological consciousness.

Another manifestation is the confusion between ecocriticism and ecological literature. Ecocriticism is a critical approach that can be applied to various types of literary works to examine their representations of nature and the environment, as well as the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world. However, the fact that a work can be analyzed through ecocriticism does not mean that it inherently belongs to the category of ecological literature. Equating a work's suitability for ecological analysis with its ecological-literary status may further blur the conceptual boundaries of ecological literature. In *Eco-China: Literary Presentation and Cross-Cultural Studies*, Long emphasizes the aesthetic characteristics and literary quality of ecological literature, stressing that analysis should not be limited to ideological themes but should combine close reading with an examination of aesthetic expression and overall significance [8].

A further problem is the anachronistic application of modern ecological concepts to classical literature and other works that do not explicitly address ecological issues. In many ancient works, views of nature are closely connected to religion, philosophy, or the experiences of agrarian societies, and their conceptions of nature cannot be equated entirely with modern environmentalism. Schliephake points out that when ancient literature is reinterpreted through modern ecological criticism, scholars should avoid directly projecting modern ecological concepts and their connotations onto ancient texts and should instead consider the socio-historical context in which the

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT39470

works were produced [9]. Ignoring these historical contexts and applying modern ecological concepts directly to classification risks imposing a later theoretical framework on earlier texts.

Finally, some studies tend to overlook the centrality of ecological content within a work. While certain texts may address environmental issues or the relationship between humans and nature, such content may occupy only a peripheral position and fail to shape the work's core themes, narrative logic, or value judgments. If even peripheral ecological expressions are sufficient for classification, the concept of ecological literature may lose its classificatory value.

Therefore, the overgeneralization of ecological literature is not merely a matter of an increasing number of works being included within its scope; more importantly, the classificatory logic itself becomes blurred. The central challenge is to distinguish between works that merely contain nature- or ecology-related content and those in which ecological consciousness constitutes a core part of the work's value structure. Clearer criteria are therefore needed to maintain relatively stable conceptual boundaries for ecological literature.

4. The feasibility of using ecological consciousness as a criterion

As noted above, natural landscapes, animal imagery, and environmental descriptions alone are insufficient to determine whether a work qualifies as ecological literature. Because natural elements may serve aesthetic, symbolic, narrative, or emotional functions, a more substantive criterion is needed. Accordingly, this paper examines whether ecological consciousness can serve as a key criterion for identifying ecological literature and analyzes its main components and applicability.

4.1. The concept and components of ecological consciousness

Ecological consciousness is not synonymous with a general concern for nature, nor is it limited to the inclusion of environmental protection, animals, or natural landscapes in a work. More precisely, it refers to a value-based understanding of the relationship between humans and nature, reflected in how a text interprets nature, understands humanity's place within the ecosystem, and considers the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds. It should therefore be assessed through multiple dimensions rather than through isolated natural images or environmental descriptions.

First, ecological consciousness involves recognition of the intrinsic value of nature. If nature serves merely as a backdrop, emotional symbol, or exploitable resource, its function remains primarily centered on human interests. By contrast, when a text acknowledges that nature possesses a relatively independent value rather than treating it solely as a tool or aesthetic object, it demonstrates a stronger ecological orientation. The recognition of nature's relatively independent value can therefore serve as one dimension of ecological consciousness.

Second, ecological consciousness involves reflection on the relationship between humans and nature. This relationship is characterized not only by exploitation but also by interdependence and mutual influence. When a literary work moves beyond viewing nature solely from a human perspective and considers both the effects of human activity on the natural environment and the environment's reciprocal effects on human life, it demonstrates ecological consciousness. For example, a work may depict the overexploitation of natural resources to question anthropocentric values and reconsider humanity's place within the ecosystem. Reflection on the interdependence, conflict, and symbiosis between humans and nature can therefore serve as another important dimension.

Third, ecological consciousness may be expressed through concern for ecological issues or crises. A work may portray environmental degradation, species extinction, resource exploitation, urban

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT39470

expansion, or other ecological problems. However, the mere presence of such issues does not constitute ecological consciousness; what matters is whether the text makes value judgments about them and explores their social, cultural, or ethical causes.

Finally, ecological consciousness should possess a certain degree of continuity, centrality, and structural integration. If ecological content appears only incidentally or serves merely as a plot device, it is unlikely to constitute a central feature of ecological literature. By contrast, when ecological consciousness consistently informs a work's themes, character relationships, narrative structure, and value expression, it is more likely to form part of its underlying ideological structure. Through an analysis of Indigenous Australian fiction, Brown points out that ecological concepts are reflected not only in the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world but also in narrative time, story structure, and traditional narrative modes [10].

Accordingly, this paper understands ecological consciousness as a multidimensional framework encompassing recognition of nature's value, reflection on the human–nature relationship, concern for ecological issues, and the continuity, centrality, and structural integration of these concerns within the text. This framework helps distinguish ecological literature from writing that merely contains descriptions of nature and provides a basis for assessing the role of ecological consciousness in identifying ecological literature.

4.2. The feasibility of ecological consciousness as a criterion for identifying ecological literature

Using ecological consciousness as a core criterion can improve the precision of identifying ecological literature. Compared with superficial textual features such as natural landscapes, animal imagery, or environmental descriptions, ecological consciousness addresses the deeper value structure of a work and can therefore better distinguish general nature writing from literary expressions with substantive ecological concerns. The criterion focuses not only on what aspects of nature a text depicts, but also on how nature is understood and how the relationship between humans and nature is represented.

First, ecological consciousness can help reduce overinclusive classification. Descriptions of nature occur widely in pastoral poetry, rural novels, love poetry, and modern poetry, but the nature depicted in these works does not necessarily carry ecological significance. If the mere presence of natural elements were used as the primary criterion, the scope of ecological literature would become overly broad. By contrast, ecological consciousness requires examination of whether nature is recognized as possessing intrinsic value, whether the human–nature relationship is critically examined, and whether these concerns are connected to the work's value judgments. This provides a more substantive basis for distinguishing ecological literature from general natural writing.

Second, ecological consciousness helps distinguish works that are suitable for ecocritical analysis from works that can be identified as ecological literature. Ecocriticism can be applied to a broad range of literary works to examine representations of nature and the environment and relationships between humans and the nonhuman world. However, a work's suitability for ecocritical analysis does not by itself establish its status as ecological literature. Ecocriticism concerns how a work is analyzed, whereas the identification of ecological literature concerns the work's conceptual and textual attributes. When ecological consciousness is persistent, central, and structurally integrated within a text, it provides a strong basis for identifying the work as ecological literature. This distinction prevents the scope of a critical approach from being conflated with the conceptual boundaries of ecological literature.

However, ecological consciousness should not be treated as an absolute or mechanical formula for classification. Understandings of the relationship between humans and nature vary across

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT39470

historical periods, cultural contexts, and literary forms, and ecological consciousness may therefore take different forms. Applying modern ecological concepts directly to classical literature may result in anachronistic interpretations, while relying on a single criterion may create a new form of conceptual rigidity. Ecological consciousness is therefore better understood as a comprehensive core criterion that must be considered together with textual context, historical background, and literary form.

Rather than providing a simple "yes" or "no" judgment, ecological consciousness offers an analytical framework with greater explanatory power than the mere presence of natural descriptions. By examining the value attributed to nature, the representation of the human-nature relationship, concern for ecological issues, and the persistence, centrality, and structural integration of these concerns, researchers can establish a more systematic basis for identifying works with the attributes of ecological literature and further clarifying its conceptual boundaries.

5. Redefining the boundaries of ecological literature

The preceding discussion has examined the differences between ecological literature and nature writing, the main manifestations of conceptual overgeneralization, and the feasibility of using ecological consciousness as a criterion for identifying ecological literature. These discussions indicate that the boundaries of ecological literature cannot be determined solely by the presence of natural landscapes, animals, or environmental descriptions. What matters is whether these elements are integrated into the work's value structure and connected to a sustained ecological consciousness. Accordingly, a more precise definition of ecological literature should consider the persistence, centrality, and structural integration of ecological consciousness within the text.

5.1. Core criteria for evaluating ecological literature

Based on the preceding analysis, ecological literature can be identified through several interrelated criteria. First, the recognition of nature's value beyond its instrumental use for humans provides an important basis for assessing ecological consciousness. If nature functions merely as a backdrop, emotional symbol, or exploitable resource, its ecological significance remains limited. By contrast, when nature is given relatively independent significance and becomes relevant to the work's value judgments, the text more clearly exhibits an ecological orientation.

Second, a work should demonstrate sustained reflection on the relationship between humans and nature. Ecological literature does not merely depict nature but may explore interdependence, conflict, domination, destruction, or symbiosis between humans and nature. When a work reconsiders humanity's place within nature or reflects on anthropocentric values, its ecological consciousness becomes more explicit.

Third, the centrality and structural integration of ecological consciousness should be considered. The presence of environmental issues, animal imagery, or ecological crises does not by itself establish a work as ecological literature. If such elements function only as plot devices, background details, or symbols and do not substantially influence the work's themes, narrative structure, or value expression, they remain secondary. By contrast, when ecological consciousness consistently informs these aspects of the text, the work more strongly exhibits the characteristics of ecological literature.

Therefore, identifying ecological literature should not depend on a single indicator but on a combined assessment of nature's values, the human–nature relationship, ecological reflection, and the persistence, centrality, and structural integration of ecological consciousness. This framework

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT39470

can reduce conceptual overgeneralization based solely on natural elements and provide a clearer basis for comparing and identifying different literary works.

5.2. The boundaries between ecological literature and general nature writing

There is no completely rigid boundary between ecological literature and general nature writing, but the two remain distinguishable. Nature writing primarily concerns the representation of nature in literary works, where nature may serve lyrical, symbolic, aesthetic, narrative, or cultural-memory functions. Its focus is often on how nature is represented, without necessarily examining the value of nature itself or the ethical relationship between humans and nature.

Ecological literature, by contrast, places greater emphasis on nature's position within the work's value structure. When nature moves beyond being merely an object of human observation or a vehicle for emotional projection and is instead given relatively independent significance, while the work also develops sustained reflection on the relationship between humans and nature, nature writing may take on stronger ecological-literary characteristics. Thus, the distinction between ecological literature and general nature writing lies not in the quantity of natural elements present, but in whether ecological consciousness is meaningfully integrated into the text.

A work may therefore contain extensive nature writing without necessarily belonging to ecological literature. A poem may describe mountains, rivers, fields, plants, and seasonal changes in detail while these elements primarily express personal emotions, ideals of seclusion, or life experiences. In such cases, the work may remain rooted in the traditions of lyric poetry, pastoral literature, or other literary forms. Conversely, a work may contain relatively few depictions of nature yet still exhibit strong ecological-literary characteristics if its central themes consistently address the relationship between humans and nature, ecological ethics, or ecological crises and develop clear value-based reflections.

Accordingly, this paper argues that the distinction between ecological literature and nature writing should shift from the mere presence of nature to the role of ecological consciousness within the text. The distinction is not intended to narrow the scope of ecocriticism, but to separate the applicability of ecocriticism as a critical approach from the identification of ecological literature as a literary category. Ecocriticism can be applied broadly to literary texts, whereas ecological literature requires relatively clear criteria and conceptual boundaries for identification.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the conceptual boundaries of ecological literature, focusing on its distinction from general nature writing and the feasibility of using ecological consciousness as a criterion for identifying ecological literature. The study argues that the mere presence of natural landscapes, animals, rural settings, or other nature-related descriptions in a literary work is insufficient to determine whether it belongs to ecological literature. When ecological consciousness does not form a sustained and significant part of the text's value structure, natural elements may primarily function as background, plot devices, symbols, lyrical expressions, or aesthetic elements and should not be equated directly with ecological literature.

In response to the research questions, this study argues that ecological consciousness can serve as a key criterion within a broader framework for identifying ecological literature, but should not be applied as a mechanical or isolated rule. The identification of ecological literature should therefore move beyond superficial descriptions of nature and examine the role of ecological consciousness within the text. This includes considerations of value attributed to nature, the representation of the

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT39470

human-nature relationship, ecological reflection, and the persistence, centrality, and structural integration of ecological consciousness. Particular attention should be given to whether a work develops sustained reflection on the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world and whether such reflection is meaningfully integrated into its value structure.

However, the framework proposed in this paper has certain limitations. Ecological consciousness is complex, and understandings of the relationship between humans and nature vary across historical periods, cultural contexts, and literary forms. Therefore, it is difficult to establish a completely uniform set of criteria applicable to all literary works. In addition, the relatively limited number of texts examined in this study does not encompass the full range of ecological literature. Future research could expand the textual sample and compare manifestations of ecological consciousness across different historical periods, cultural traditions, and literary forms. It could also develop a more differentiated framework for assessing the degree and forms of ecological consciousness, thereby further refining the identification and conceptual boundaries of ecological literature.

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