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Review: Technological Nature: Adaptation and the Future of Human Life

By Peter H. Kahn, Jr.

Reviewed by Byron Anderson
DeKalb, Illinois, USA

Kahn, Peter H., Jr. *Technological Nature: Adaptation and the Future of Human Life*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011. xviii, 230 pp. ISBN: 978-0-262-11322-9, US \$24.95

Technological nature is defined as “technologies that in various ways mediate, augment, or simulate the natural world” (p. xiii). In *Technological Nature*, the author focuses on the psychological and physiological effects of interaction with technological nature on individuals. Data are collected from studies using various forms of technological nature, specifically real-time nature on flat digital screens, interacting with AIBO, a robotic dog, and Telegarden, “an installation that allows people to plant and tend seeds by controlling a robotic arm through a Web-based interface” (p. 151). An additional chapter, not based on research data, introduces a condition called “environmental generational disorder” where each generation views a degraded condition in the environment as normal. If allowed to continue, the disorder could lead to a society that has no memory of real wildness. This would lead to many losses; for example, numerous studies have shown that “stress reduction is one of the perceived benefits of spending time in a wilderness area” (p. 13).

Kahn is Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology and Director of the Human Interaction with Nature and Technological Systems Laboratory at the University of Washington. He seeks to answer if we should be concerned that actual nature is being replaced with technological nature, especially since the line between technology and nature is becoming more obscure. He does well in explaining why the replacement of actual nature with technological nature does matter. Benchmarks are established from conceptual categories and psychological coding systems, for example, and the data help evaluate the effectiveness of technological nature. Kahn concludes that technological nature is better than no nature at all and, when used, should be seen as a bonus on actual nature and not a substitute for it. Because we are increasingly dependent on technology to survive, a lot of effort will have to be put forth to keep real nature relevant. Kahn speculates that the English language is not well equipped to characterize or talk about what is real versus what appears real but is in fact technological. While Kahn believes that technology can “diminish the depth and richness of human life, and more specifically our relationship with nature” (p. 35), he does conclude that humans can adapt and flourish as a technological species in relation to nature.

With numerous tables and figures supplementing the text, this book should be of vital interest to anyone interested in technological forecasting or the social aspects of technology. Highly recommended for library collections in psychology, technology, or computer science.

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