

# Outdoor Education for Human/Nature Relationships

*Dr Peter Martin*

## **Abstract**

Outdoor education curriculum documentation and promotional material has at different times laid claim to outdoor education developing relationships with nature. Theorizing about outdoor education and relationships with nature is evident in the literature, but a research base is scarce. What is a relationship with nature? How might such relationships with nature change? Importantly, how might outdoor education programs foster such change, and in what direction? This paper will overview outcomes from qualitative research program which sought answers to these questions. The research data is used to propose a pedagogical framework for human/nature relationship development.

## **Introduction**

In the discourse that is outdoor education theorizing the phrase ‘human nature relationships’ has gained prominence, but has been adopted largely unexplored and unexplained. The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) year 11 and 12 Outdoor Education Study design, for example, developed a stronger focus on human nature relationships over a decade ago. In the introduction to that study design it claims that “the primary focus of Outdoor Education is on understanding people’s relationships with the outdoors” (Board of Studies 1994, p. 5). While the study has gone through a number of re-accreditations since, including merging with environmental studies, the focus on human/nature relationships remains. In the 2004 consultation draft study design for Outdoor and Environmental Studies, the introduction opens with “ [This] is a study of the ways humans interact with and relate to natural environments” (Consultation draft June 2004). The VCE year 11 and 12 study design would be the single most influential curriculum document in outdoor education for Victorian schools.

For me, the phrase “understanding people’s relationships with the outdoors. . . .” or, “the ways humans interest with or relate to . . .” suggests that the study would explore the affective domain which underpins relationships as they are commonly understood, but unfortunately the study doesn’t move in that direction now and never has. Instead, the study is largely a cognitive analysis of what humans do in and with natural environments; the experiential component is now a non-mandated fraction of the total study time. However, many teachers still retain and include experiential knowing, albeit under sometimes considerable administrative pressures to not take their students away from school. There is a disconnection here. While I believe outdoor educators have a growing sense that relationships with nature are an important focus for their teaching, there is little to guide curriculum construction or conceptual clarity, as a consequence there is little to justify education *in* the outdoors (let alone *for*) – hence the motive for the research project described here.

## **The Research Context and Methods**

Fourteen students participated in this study to its conclusion (8 men, 6 women), all were involved in the outdoor education degree at La Trobe University, Bendigo, Victoria. Four teaching staff, three men and one women also contributed. (All names used in this article are pseudonyms.)

Data were collected over a two year period via repeated interviews and journals. The outdoor education degree programme at La Trobe University, Bendigo emphasises

human/nature relationship topics, making it an information rich context to explore pedagogical alternatives.

The outdoor education programme at Bendigo includes both practical and theoretical outdoor education experiences. Practical work is typified by journeys of four days duration. “Outdoor activities such as bushwalking, paddling, cross country skiing, rock climbing and naturalist studies form the core of field work. Students learn how to structure and use outdoor experiences as a means to learn about and understand human relationships with nature” (Department of Outdoor Education and Environment, 2004, p.1). The longest practical trip, an alpine walk, is 18 to 21 days. Shorter skill development or environmental science field trips also occur.. The basis of the programme is traditional adventure activities, although alternative less adventurous focussed outdoor activities also take place. The students in this study completed at least 52 days each academic year in course based practical fieldwork; as well as additional days in their own time. The theoretical material in the course is somewhat eclectic, drawn from education, eco-psychology, environmental ethics, eco-philosophy, environmental science/studies and outdoor education and leadership theory.

In-depth interviews took place prior to the commencement of the programme, at the end of year 1 and at the end of year 2. Students also maintained a research journal for the two years of the study. The qualitative data were coded and analysed with the use of the Nvivo qualitative data analysis programme.<sup>1</sup>

### **What is a Relationship With Nature?**

If you ask someone about their relationship with nature, the chances are they’ll stare at you blankly, as participants in this research did to me in initial interviews. Two problems associated with research into human/nature relationships are immediately apparent. First, the word nature itself is complex and carries multiple meanings and interpretations (Chambers, 1984; Marshall, 1992; Seddon, 1997). How participants in this study understood the word ‘nature’ changed during the course of the research. The second problem flowing from the first is that of language, or rather, a lack of it. Authors concerned with exploring human relationships struggle with the lack of appropriate terminology for describing how people relate to each other (Josselson, 1996). The same problem is multiplied when attempting to discuss human relationships with nature.

How participants in this study understood the word nature was indicative of their relationship to nature. For the majority, the word nature initially implied a separateness from human artifacts and impacts. Most participants included humans as part of nature, but only so far as their impact on nature was minimal. However, within six months of commencing their outdoor education course, most participants had begun to define nature by describing their own *relationships* to nature. They sought to understand the question, ‘what is nature?’, by making reference to how they *felt* in nature, what they *knew* about nature, or what nature *meant* in their lives. I believe this is the real intent, albeit tacit perhaps, of what outdoor education seeks to contribute to human and environmental futures via curriculum concerned with human/nature relationships.

The research process identified six different modes of expression used by students to communicate their relationships with nature. These included: describing how they felt emotionally, detailing what they knew about nature, and describing caring feelings or

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<sup>1</sup> Although a member of the outdoor education department I was not directly involved in teaching any of the research participants during the data collection period.

actions. Students also used mechanisms such as metaphorical imagery (nature is a place for ..., nature is like a...). Some students also employed poetry and sketches (some of which were prompted by the interview process).

. . . well I had never really heard of the term, 'relationships with nature' and I was just totally stumped by the question. Now, I think, ah, . . . I have heard all of the jargon, I have heard all of how it's supposed to be and what's supposed to be good and what sounds good and everything – so I reckon I've been influenced by all that. I think it's a good influence . . . . Because I have really had to look at how I do really relate to nature. I don't think I had ever sat down and thought about nature, it was just always there.  
(Silvia, interview 3)

A pivotal finding from the research was that the outdoor education course provided students with a language and conceptual framework to talk about their relationship with nature. In this research I found that thinking and understanding human/nature relationships and the language to discuss them evolved in parallel. A conclusion consistent with findings of developmental psychology research into language and cognition (see, Goodluck, 1991).

The most common form of language used in expressing relationships with nature was that of metaphorical imagery. All the students and staff in this study employed metaphorical imagery. In the majority of cases metaphors came from specific articles introduced to students in first year (Gough, 1990; and Martin, 1996). The accessibility of this language, such as 'nature as a friend', gave rise to extended discussion and direct application for students.

### **Identifying Different Types of Relationships With Nature?**

After data analysis I concluded that within this group of students three broad categories or types of relationships with nature were evident. I caricatured these orientations as, Travelling through Nature, Caring for Nature and Integrated with Nature. The categories arose primarily from two different pathways in data analysis.

In earlier interviews I tended to code data under a particular set of nodes, the nodes themselves being suggested from the data and the literature. However, with additional interviews, I found I was adding extra nodes and using nodes I had rarely used in earlier interviews. In other words, the data coming from later sources seemed to be categorically different from that of the first interviews, something was changing. As an example, the node, human/nature relationships (HNR)/part of/spirituality, was used to code data related to the spiritual aspects of a relationship with nature. I had used this node only twice for the first set of interviews, for brief comments from Aaron and George. By the end of the last interview I had used this node for multiple paragraphs from several other people. Some of this variance in coding was accounted for by later interviews probing with differently worded questions, however, the essential intent of the interviews (describe your relationship with nature) remained the same.

Another pattern was evident when the source of data at particular nodes was compared. For example, at a node set to code data concerned with the everyday implications of participants' relationships with nature, a small set of people were seen to be making similar comments, comments quite different from the rest of the group. The *same* set of participants also appeared with like comments at other nodes, such as that set for storing remarks concerned with feeling a part of nature. Such similarity of ideas within a

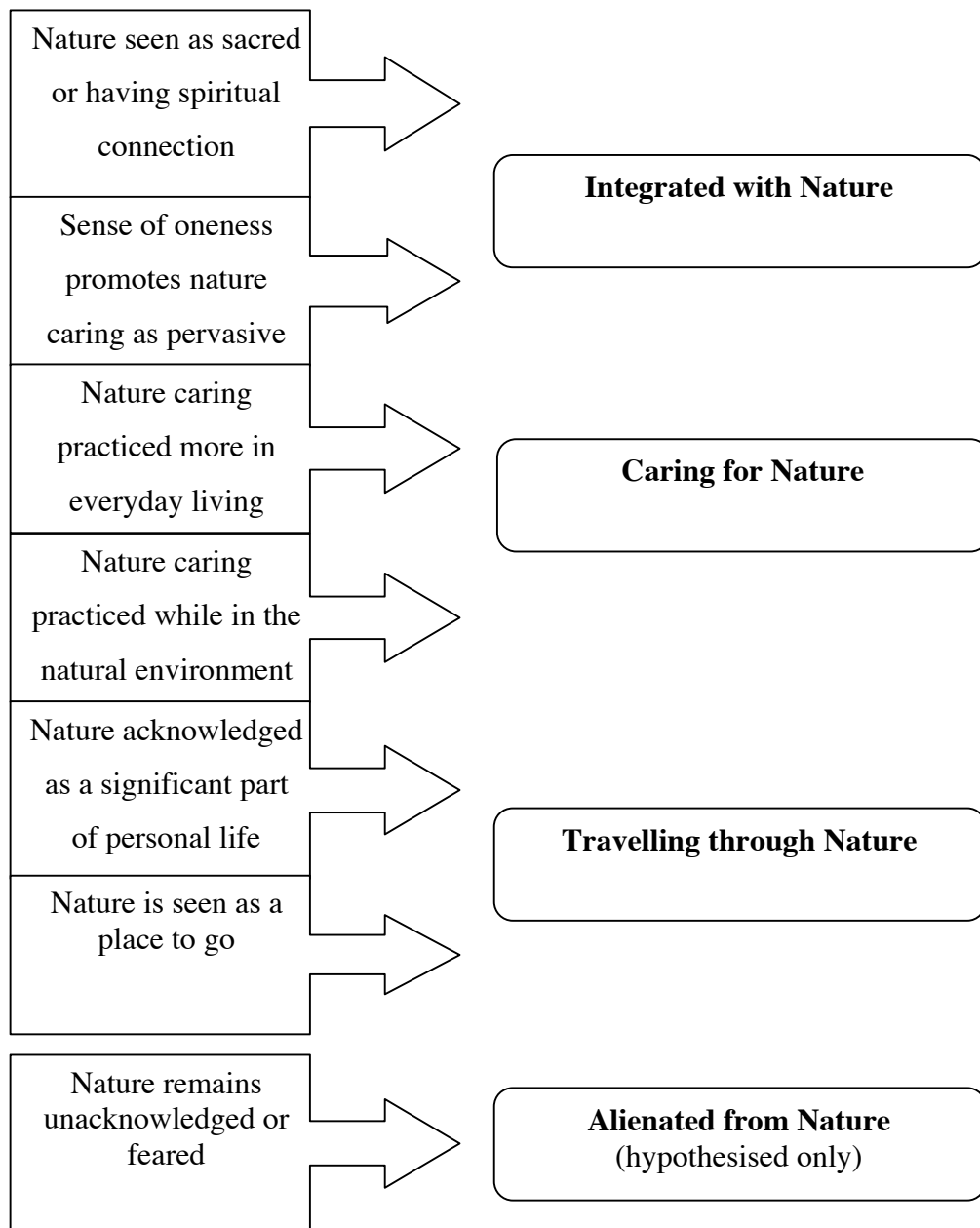
subgroup of participants was pivotal in suggesting the existence of categorical types in the first instance.

Analysis of the data and review of literature, when combined, led to the caricatured description of the three relationships with nature: 'Travelling through', 'Caring for', and 'Integrated with', Nature. The descriptions are caricatures, in that any form of categorisation is in itself inherently inaccurate, limiting, or an overstatement. Each of the people I interviewed and came to know over an extended period offered unique perspectives and insights into their relationship with nature. They changed to different degrees and at different times, however clusters of ideas did exist and were useful in terms of sorting data.

***Significant signposts to human relationships with nature.***

In the course of data analysis some constructs emerged as significant in terms of the way they helped group like data. These constructs served as signposts in that they helped point the way to particular types of relationships with nature. The various orientations to nature tended to be differentiated by the presence of particular constructs or ways of relating to nature. All participants, for example, acknowledged nature as personally significant. Most participants also cared for the environment whilst in the bush. In addition, some, but not all, also cared for the environment in their everyday lives. However, only a few participants also saw nature as sacred or having spiritual meaning. The appearance of these factors – personal significance, bush caring, everyday caring and sacredness – therefore differentiated particular orientations to nature. Figure 1 sketches these key constructs as signposts for each of the orientations.

**Figure 1. Diagram of Significant Signposts to Human Relationships With Nature**



### **How Might Such Relationships With Nature Change?**

All of the participants to this research commenced the study with positive relationships with nature – each had determined to complete a degree in outdoor education and build a career in the outdoors. However, during the two years of the study all research participants reported a change in their relationship with nature although to differing degrees. One of limitations of the study is that no field observations were possible as a way to verify any relationship changes. (The reader needs to be mindful of the influence of the well researched gap between expressed and actual environmental behaviour here.)

Within this particular group the different relationship caricatures were sequential, and I believe they are developmental (figure 2.). There has been little research on how relationships with nature can develop – although examples of personal experience and changes are increasingly available (see for example *Landscapes of the Heart*, Aleksiuik & Nelson, 2002). In understanding relationship development between people, research suggests that cognitive development is fundamental (Josselson, 1996), particularly with regard to concepts of the self and the capacity to think about the relative positioning of the self to others.

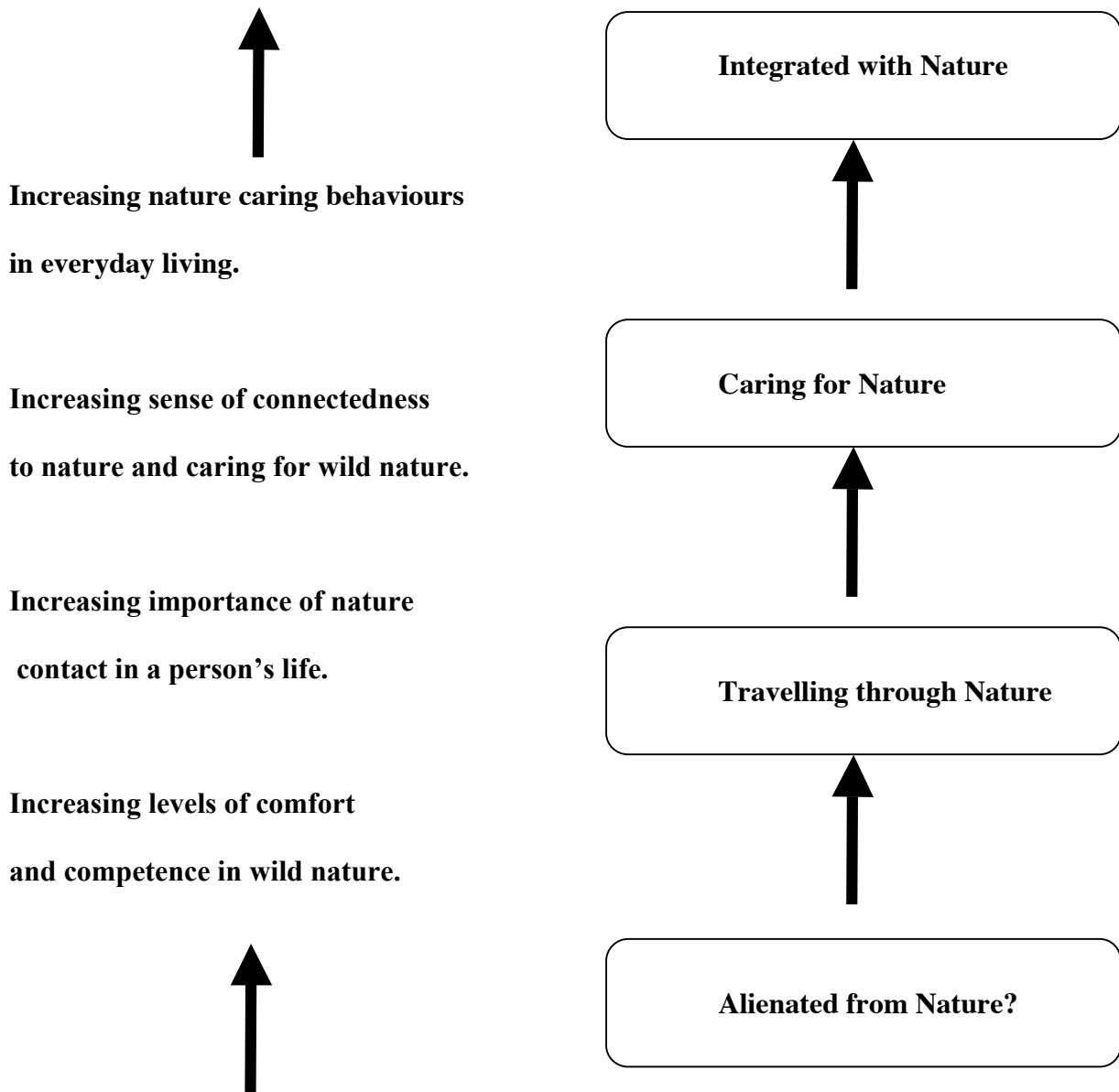
The effort in developmental psychology has been to view human growth as proceeding from dependence to autonomy and to account for the processes by which more and greater aspects of experience are taken over by the self. (Josselson 1996, p. 16).

Josselson's description of developmental psychology characterised here potentially contrasts with my view of human/nature relational development which would argue that more developed interaction recognises human and nature *interdependency* such as that characterised by the deep ecology sense of unity with nature and an expansive sense of Self. Thus, rather than increased autonomy and potency of decision making, a person recognises that his or her wellbeing is fundamentally linked to the wellbeing of the Earth, not all of which is within his or her control. If Josselson's observations about developmental psychology focussing only on the potency of the individual are correct, it seems unlikely that such a basis would provide a suitable conceptual framework for understanding human/nature relationships.

Peter Kahn (1999, 2002) in his work on human/nature relationships preferences cognitive theory, but stops short of suggesting a developmental aspect for human/nature relationships, admitting, "that proposition would need the support of developmental research" (p. 58) – research which he has not undertaken. Kahn's (1999) preference for selecting cognitive development to underpin human/nature relationships is as a consequence of his belief in the potency of structural developmental theories in psychology, and his interest in moral reasoning as illustrative of a relationship with nature. However, the appropriateness of cognitive developmental models for explanation of human/nature relationships was not directly investigated by Kahn, and remains open to further study.

In this study every participant changed in their relationship with nature in the same sequence and direction. Whether that sequence is developmental, an artifact of the educational process or illustrative of all relationships with nature is problematic. However, for this group of participants changes did occur in a sequence. This result was not anticipated and stands as one of the more significant findings to come from the data.

**Figure 2. A Developmental Typology of Human/Nature Relationships?**



## **How Might Outdoor Education Programmes Foster Such Change?**

### ***Language.***

As already mentioned one of the key initial factors provided by the outdoor education programme was that of provision of language, motive and experience to conceptualise and discuss human relationships with nature.

The lectures have given me a way of explaining what I thought. Without the lectures I think I couldn't have explained what we've talked about. (Rick, interview 2)

It seems to me that outdoor education which seeks development of human/nature relationships must incorporate and explore a language and culture to accept and evolve a way to talk about human relationships with nature.

### ***Direct personal experience of nature.***

Direct experience of nature leading to a sense of comfort in the outdoors was expressed as being of central importance to developing relationships with nature by all the participants in the research, regardless of their depth of relationship – hardly surprising perhaps. However, not all experiences in nature enhance a relationship.

Participants linked positive direct experience with nature to levels of comfort. Comfort in nature was frequently raised as both a catalyst for, and consequence of, changed relationships with nature.

I really enjoy going to Arapiles, I think it's because I have been there several times now and every time is like a revisit. I sort of think that to get to know a place well you have to go there several times and I've done that. . . . Feeling comfortable in a place is a good sign that you are on your way to really knowing that place. Because I feel so comfortable now in the bush it's like being at home almost. So – I go away and I find the sun comes up and I'll be awake as soon as it comes up and hear the birds. I don't have any problem getting up and enjoying that part of the day. (Ed, interview 2)

Thus, the time with nature participants thought beneficial for developing a relationship with nature was time which enhanced their sense of feeling comfortable – this was often related to specific locations or types of environments. Many could identify how this growing sense of feeling more comfortable differed from their earlier experiences. Kate and Karen offer examples:

It was probably after the Grampians 6 day hike I started to appreciate nature more. After those 6 days I felt a hell of a lot more comfortable going out into the bush. Before that I'd just felt insecure and not at home. And then after those 6 days, that made me appreciate nature a lot more. And then on the 21 day hike a lot more again, just from spending so long out there. (Kate, interview 3)

Yeah, I'm completely at home in the bush whereas before I felt like I was just visiting. Now it's my other home, it's a natural thing. I can pack a pack in about half an hour, I know what I need to be completely self sufficient out there and I can use what's around – and also I'm happy just sitting and contemplating myself. I'm happy anywhere. (Karen, interview 2)

### ***Individual and specific relationships with place.***

Direct experience and extended time to enable familiarity are common elements in participants' descriptions of how they developed their relationships with nature. Three significant issues arise from this. First, participants talk about relationships with nature in a general way, but frequently draw on specific relationships with places or types of environments when seeking examples, as evident in the examples from Ed and Kate above. In other words, as in relationships between people perhaps, relationships with nature are *individual and specific*. The following extract from an interview with Aaron illustrates this well.

I think it comes back to a feeling inside – it's tacit, it can't be explained. It's a feeling in your heart when you are there. Some places I find really inspiring while in others, although they might be visually inspiring, the energy there might not be so as inspiring or accommodating. (Aaron, interview 3)

### ***The specificity of skill and competence.***

The second issue to arise from direct experience in nature is that familiarity and comfort grew from particular types or styles of experience, such as the activity being undertaken, or the length of the experience. Comfort in nature is related to feelings of personal competence. Importantly, for both these latter aspects participants needed to develop outdoor knowledge and skills to enable time with nature to be comfortable.

I feel confident say bushwalking, so I get more *with* nature. But say on – like paddling I'm starting to get more confident, but I still feel sort of like nature's over there and I'm over there. Like I'm fighting against it when I'm paddling and stuff. Umm – similar to rock-climbing too. I'm just terrified of the rock and I feel like it's fighting against me! (Kate, interview 2)

### ***Some implications for outdoor education practice.***

The individual and specific basis of relationships with nature, the style of experience and the need for a sense of comfort all have significant implications for outdoor education practices. Students were clear that relationships developed most with specific places as a consequence of extended and repeated shared experiences. This is a logical truism of relationships between people but seems not to figure well in determining outdoor education practices and relationships with nature. From this study I have concluded that to develop deeper relationships with a place requires multiple visits, in a diversity of seasons, engaged in differing activity and an encouragement for students to explore the multiple dimensions of a place. No doubt this is related to feelings of competence and comfort also.

. . .with revisiting a place I found I observed things a lot more and know a lot more about the place I was in. . .a lot more detailed especially with respect to the relationships with nature stuff. (Peter, interview 2)

The data related to the style of the activity for developing relationships with nature also holds some significant conclusions for outdoor education which seeks to develop relationships with nature. Overwhelmingly, participants considered activities where technical skill demands were lower and which allowed time to relate and explore the environment at a slower, less demanding pace more effective in developing their

relationship with nature, although some significant caveats to this were evident. There is a paradox in the need for students to be comfortable in the outdoors and the expressed value of conducting slower less technical outdoor activities. For some students a focus on relationships with nature was unhelpful and even worked against developing a positive relationship with a place.

I remember being quite critical in my journal of the first Stirling ski trip and the climbing trip we went on – like they [staff] were saying “now you have got to develop a relationship with this place, a relationship with nature while you are on this trip”. It’s like “I haven’t got time! I’m learning these skills”, it’s the wrong end of the continuum at the moment. “Let me get the skills developed then I can move forward and start to work on the relationship with the place.” It’s [the course] definitely promoting a deep connection with nature. But not everybody is ready for that deep connection. (George, interview 3)

Like, yeah, you’re out in the environment, you’re here, but you’re mainly here to become real close [to nature], which is good, but just suddenly – it’s hard to explain. . . Umm It’s hard because I like the bush heaps, and the course, but the way they go about it. . . Like I’ll see some who are walking along and then sit and talk for like 2 hrs about something then. I don’t mean to be destination orientated but sometimes you just have to be. It’s just weird how some people say as soon as we get out there “we are not here for the destination, not here to get somewhere, we’re just here to have a look around.” And sometimes you think yeah that’s good, but wouldn’t that be good sometimes to just do a hard day’s walk? They don’t piss me off, but sometimes they do get me annoyed, just the little niggling. (Simon, interview 2)

From Rick:

As far as the trips go, the activities are a non-event in my mind. . . . Sometimes on the [course] trips I feel like they’re just chucking us in the trip and they want nature to become part of us without letting us take it as a gym first and then build on it, you know. And the best relationships with a female, a male female relationship – well they’re friends first and then it becomes deeper and then they become part of each other, well – it’s the same thing as nature, you’ve got to see it as a gym . . . and then as a friend and then part of, deeper. There’s nothing wrong with [the] focus on the trip the fact that this is a climbing trip. Let’s just go and climb our guts out and enjoy the climbing and the nature thing will just come you know – of course it helps if there is someone there and says oh this is, ah, such and such a type of rock and how it’s used and how to use this feature to your advantage and that sort of thing.

[Where do you position your experiences this year with respect to that summary?]

I feel that they just hate this – we’re not allowed to see nature as a gym – we haven’t been there and experienced nature as a gym yet, this is someone who might not know nature. They want us to be at one with nature, nature to be a part of us and I think in a way it’s kind of a sleazy thing you know, you go to a nightclub, you pick up and you might. . . and to make yourself part of that woman or whatever, you know, but you

haven't gone through those steps in between. That relationship then is worth nothing. A one night stand is not worth very much. (Rick, interview 2)

The above comments are challenging for staff who are working hard to develop a concept of nature as more than just an outdoor gymnasium. Comments such as this were only evident from male participants in the research, but that they were evident at all in such a motivated and committed group of learners is noteworthy. Decreasing the amount of adventure and technical knowledge in an activity doesn't seem to be a simple solution to promoting increased relationships with nature. There is clear evidence here that this can destabilise the love of the outdoors the students already had by marginalizing them from their expected rewards, excitement and fun of outdoor activity involvement – effectively working away from the desired educational goal. A maintenance of adventure which ensures that participants must have a sense of dependence on nature for their wellbeing, as is evident in many activities, may well underlie the dynamic here (Raffan, 1993). Dependence on nature, promoted by outdoor experiences, was specifically mentioned by several participants as a catalyst in their relationship with nature.

In summary, students need skills to feel and be comfortable and competent in the outdoors, to overcome initial fears. But, students acknowledge that skill learning demands attention, so takes away from an opportunity to appreciate and develop a relationship with a place. However, if the skill demands are reduced to enable more exploratory time, or the focus shifted, some students are either left feeling threatened by the place, or are disappointed that anticipated learning and enjoyment is being denied them. Dependence on nature is also absent in less adventurous encounters.

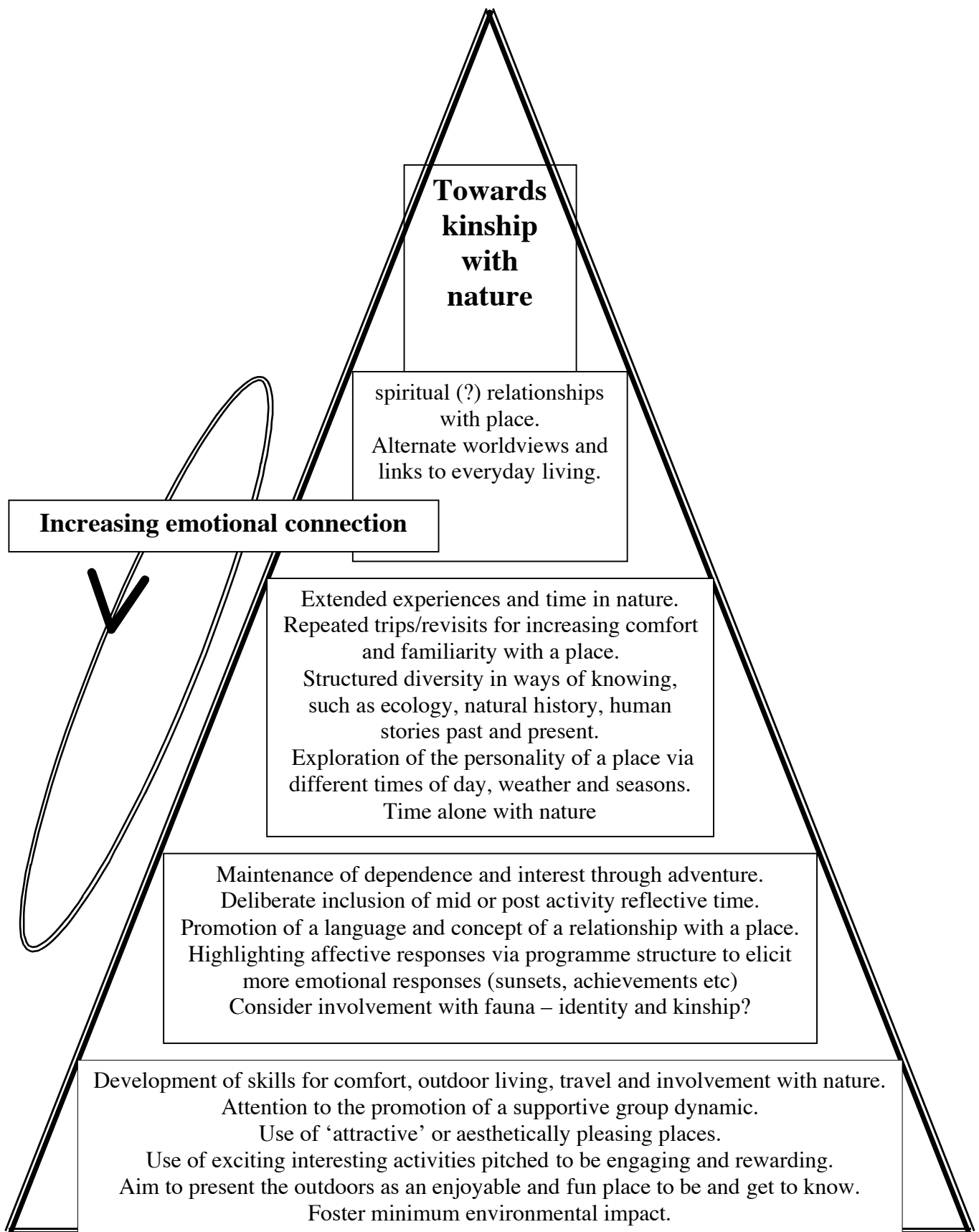
There were other aspects mentioned that also helped build relationships with nature, such as solo time (so long as it was within comfort levels) and interaction with animals. Within this group there was little evidence to suggest that men or women develop relationships differently – although there were more objections to the 'deskilling' of experiences by men than women. Age also didn't seem to be an influencing factor for this group either. However, age range was somewhat narrow, with participants aged between 18 to 35 years old. I was interested to see if ecological knowledge influenced relationships with nature. Focussing on ecological connections within biotic communities, and learning individual species names were both cited as ways to deepen a relationship with nature, but were not identified as something which initiated such relationships, nor was such knowledge seen as important by all participants.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the answer to how outdoor education can promote increased relationships between people and nature is not simple. However, what has emerged from this research is that the well sequenced introduction of concepts and experiences with nature can be highly effective in promoting a kinship like relationship with nature, at least for a group such as this one. Figure 3 describes that sequence as suggested by the data from this research.

The figure summarises key influences on relationships with nature. I have arranged these influences in a hierarchical manner, leading towards a kinship relationship with nature. I believe there is qualitative justification for this order for the group of participants involved in this study. I have a sense that this arrangement could also have some merit with other programmes. In essence I see this as a guide to teaching for enhanced relationships with nature. It is impossible to consider these factors in isolation – clearly

each is part of a bigger, more complex integrated whole that makes up the lived experience of developing a relationship with nature.

**Figure 3. A Pedagogical Framework for Outdoor Education Which Seeks Improved Relationships with Nature.**



## **Emotional Connections and Conclusion**

As a conclusion, one final point is worth stressing. What the students in this research talked about were emotionally moderated relationships with the outdoors. As I have described, knowledge, skill and the conduct of the experience all influenced that relationship, but the relationship itself was an emotional one. Students freely spoke about a love of nature, and they meant love. They spoke of feelings inside, of felt responses, or emotions such as joy and sadness.

I've felt more inner feelings like peace and joy and happiness, stuff like that.  
(Silvia, interview 3)

[The] only words I could think of were inside – I can't really show you but you get a warm squidgy feeling going right the way through you. (Karen, interview 1)

The importance of emotional responses in developing relationships with nature is supported by previous research (Bragg, 1995; Kellert, 1996; Haskell, 2000) and is philosophically consistent with an eco-feminist ethic of care.

If outdoor education sees itself as making a contribution to human well being and a more sustainable environmental future, then promoting healthy emotional connections between people and place seems a worthy step. Recognising that it is growth in the affective domain helps explain for me the role of adventure and the importance of time under the stars. I would agree with one of the UK's elders of outdoor education Harold Drasdo's comment in a piece titled *Climbing as Art*.

A climb is the most human relationship possible with a mountain face. Climbs amplify the persona of a mountain. (Drasdo, 1974, p. 222)

And from the feminist writer Nel Noddings who has written much on developing an ethic of care:

...while much of what goes on in caring is rational and well thought out, the basic relationship is not, and neither is the required awareness of relatedness. . . .  
(Noddings, 1984, p. 61)

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## About the author

Dr Peter Martin is head of the Department of Outdoor Education and Environment at La Trobe University, Bendigo. He is fortunate enough to work with a team of committed outdoor educators who collectively provide a fertile environment for critical thought and practice. As a consequence ideas are always changing and open to challenge! A concern that outdoor education clarifies its contribution to environmental and human futures is an uppermost professional and research interest.

Email: p.martin@latrobe.edu.au