

Decolonizing encounters with the Murray River: building place responsive outdoor education.

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Abstract

How Australians experience a place such as the Murray River has been extensively shaped by our colonial heritage. Colonial notions of how the river ought to behave and be utilised have contributed to the river's transformation physically, ecologically and culturally. Colonisation has also left behind an intellectual legacy in the way Australians conceptualise 'nature'. At a practical level, outdoor education experiences of the Murray that do not make reference to the particulars of the place, such as the current declining ecological health of the Murray, might well be read as an act of colonisation. In order to decolonise encounters with places, such as the Murray River, I suggest that outdoor education pedagogy develop experiences that are place specific and responsive. In this critical reflection on practice, I draw on student encounters with the Murray River to highlight ways of placing personal experiential learning into a broader cultural context in order to counter colonial understandings of 'nature' and foster deeper awareness of our relationships with the river and the land.

Introduction

For the last few years I have been developing outdoor education experiences in a tertiary setting that seek to connect students with the Murray River (or parts of it), and the socio-ecological understandings that have shaped its declining health. The undergraduate students I work with typically go on to become educators in outdoor, environmental or community education, or with natural resource management agencies. In the subject 'River Environments', we explore different sections of the Murray using both canoes and walking as modes of travel¹. Our canoe journeys down the river are focused on seeing the multiple ways people utilize, understand and impact on the Murray. On these journeys we travel enough distance to see different aspects of the Murray but not too far that the focus becomes the activity of canoeing (that is, we use canoes to see the river, not canoe the river for the sake of the activity). While I teach students how to be safe and comfortable in the outdoors I primarily focus on ways of seeing or observing the surrounding world and how people, including ourselves, might relate to and understand it. We typically spend time watching birds, exploring billabongs or get off the river to wander in the forest. As part of each experience, which are usually 3 or 4 days long, I ask students to reflect on their encounters with the river, and how the experience has shaped their learning and understanding of the state of the Murray.

I have generated these experiences out of a desire to connect students with the Murray in emotional and physical ways, but also to build awareness of the health of the river that is shaped by structural aspects of our culture. This is framed by my concern that outdoor education experiences that do not refer to the particulars of a place run the risk of perpetuating the Western and colonial intellectual tradition of assuming all places are empty of history, both natural and cultural. While the devastating impact colonialism has had on the Australian environment has been well documented (see for example Bolton, 1992; Lines, 1991), little attention appears to have been devoted in outdoor education to the intellectual legacy this has left behind. In this paper I wish to share with readers some of the material I have encountered

in my endeavour to develop place sensitive and responsive experiences that challenge colonial understandings of 'nature' and place in Australia. This paper, therefore, is part discussion of the colonial legacy we are faced with in Australian in developing place responsive education, and part voice of the students who have been involved in these experiences. Students' accounts of the river, placed in a broader cultural context of how the river is conceptualised, provide me with hope that place sensitive and responsive education can provide an alternative to colonial understandings of nature.

The Murray River: a place in need of education

Lying at the heart of Australia's largest catchment, the Murray River has existed for more than sixty million years, with human history in the area more than 40,000 years old (Mackay, 1990). Known as the 'Millewa' to some groups of aboriginal people, the river was an important source of cultural identity, as well as water, food, and timber for canoes, shelter and wood for fires (Walker, 1983). Since the arrival of Europeans, less than 200 years ago, the river has been subjected to dramatic physical and cultural transformation (Sinclair, 2001). With European settlement the Millewa became the Murray, aboriginal people were dispossessed of their land and the widespread clearing of native vegetation commenced for broad acre farming, grazing of livestock and irrigation. The introduction of dams, weirs and channels to regulate and manage the movement of water also brought about considerable change to the river. In the process of transforming the river and surrounding landscape, the Murray-Darling Basin became Australia's most productive agricultural region. While the region has played a significant role in the financial development of Australia as a country, it is also experiencing severe widespread environmental degradation (Lawrence & Vanclay, 1992). Considerable evidence is available to support the contention that the Murray's ecological health is in decline (see for example Sinclair, 2001; Walker, 1983). While the health of the river is determined by a complex set of factors the central issue remains the attitudes and activities of European settlers. The introduction of cultural understandings of the land, agricultural practices and environmental management regimes of the last 200 years were primarily developed by a people and culture new to the Australian landscape (Bolton, 1992).

In his book *The Murray: a river and its people* Paul Sinclair (2001) provides a detailed account of the physical and cultural transformation the Murray has undergone in the last 200 years. Sinclair gives an enlightening account of the numerous ways people remember, relate to and make sense of the Murray. Many accounts demonstrate strong connection with the river and sorrow for its declining health. In discussing the values of the river and landscape that were significant in shaping European settlement, he highlights the paradox that these have declined to the point where the old river no longer exists. Sinclair (2001, p. 22) cautions that "if Australians forget the old Murray and the unique cultures and ecologies associated with its waters, they will also impoverish their capacity to forge new relationships with a different sort of Murray that is currently taking shape". When I consider the relationship between outdoor education and the Murray, the health and history of the river present me with a compelling case for developing education that is conscious of the conceptual frameworks that may contribute to the health and future of the river.

Conceptualising 'nature' - understanding the Murray

Australia's colonial heritage has had, and still has a dramatic influence on how Australians understand and relate to both the land and its people (Adams & Mulligan, 2003). Arguably

one of the strongest legacies has been the way the natural world is conceptualised. While considerable attention has been devoted to discussing the rise of anthropocentric understandings of nature within environmental philosophy literature (see for example Hay, 2002; Marshall, 1992), the central thread of the ideology remains the notion that humans and culture are separate from 'nature'. Australia's colonial heritage, according to Plumwood (2003), is underpinned by a Eurocentric form of anthropocentrism that "tends to see the human sphere as beyond or outside the sphere of 'nature', construes ethics as confined to the human..., treats the non-human *difference* as inferiority, and understands both non-human agency and value in hegemonic terms that deny and subordinate them to a hyperbolized human agency" (p. 53). Plumwood (2003) argues that for Eurocentric anthropocentrism 'nature', being separate from humans, becomes an 'Other'. The Other, in turn, is "not an individual but a member of a class stereotyped as interchangeable, replaceable, all alike – that is, as homogenous" (Plumwood, 2003, p. 55).

The colonisation of Australia, as with other places around the world, wasn't one act in time and space, but rather many incidents over an extended period of time (Adams & Mulligan, 2003). Similarly, Plumwood (2003) highlights that while it is usually acknowledged that the process of colonisation dispossessed indigenous and often plundered and damaged their lands, we² are less accustomed to acknowledging that the "...concept of colonization can be applied to non-human nature itself, and that the relationship between humans, or certain groups of them, and the more-than-human world might be aptly characterised as one of colonization" (p. 52). Likewise, the thought processes of colonization often produce blind-spots to these oppressive relationships in both the coloniser and the colonised (ibid.).

In this light, I find the relatively recent quest in outdoor education to 'develop human-nature relationships' or 'connect with nature' (see for example Higgins, 1996/97; Martin, 1999; Martin & Thomas, 2000; Nettleton, 1999; Thomas & Thomas, 2000) a cause for concern³. While the *idea* is commendable, without consideration or acknowledgement of the place, culture, context or situation of an experience it could be argued that this is another form of colonialism, or neo-colonialism perhaps. I am fearful that our colonial history has produced a blind-spot in how we seek to relate to 'nature', for 'nature' is again subjected to our desire for 'mastery' in our attempt to 'connect' to it. As members of colonising culture we are also victims of the language and conceptual frameworks of colonisation; we are also colonised (Plumwood, 2000). Alternatively, I suggest that connecting with nature needs to be connecting with the specifics of a place, coming to terms with the issues that contribute to shaping life in a place. As an educator, I seek to challenge the idea that 'nature' is homogenous, for it is not a universal backdrop that any person, from any culture, from any place, in any place, can instantly connect to. While I find it encouraging that within outdoor education some attention has been given to developing place sensitive education (see for example Brookes, 2002a; Lugg, 2004; Preston, 2004), I believe there is still considerable work to be done.

Power relationships are another aspect of colonialism that I believe warrant our consideration. Plumwood (2003) asserts that the "Eurocentric colonial system was one of hegemony – a system of power relations in which the interests of the dominant party were disguised as universal and mutual, but in which the colonizer actually prospered at the expense of the colonized" (p. 51). Again, I am concerned that this criticism could well be levelled at outdoor education and its search to 'connect with nature' (without some due thought to the process, place or people involved). Participants may come away from an experience with warm 'fuzzy' feelings that they have 'connected with nature', but I would ask 'what is in it for

‘nature’ or the place?’. In our drive to ‘connect with nature’, without consideration of the place and context, I am fearful we run the risk of perpetuating the conceptualisation of nature as an ‘other’, that we may subjugate nature to serve our purposes. “The colonized [nature], and their ‘disorderly’ space, are available for use, without limit, and the assimilating project of the colonizer is to remake the colonized and their space in the image of the colonizer’s own self-space, culture or land, which are represented as the paradigm of reason, beauty and order” (Plumwood, 2003, p. 58).

By turning all of the natural world into ‘nature’, undifferentiated, homogenous, “nature [becomes] represented as inessential and massively denied as the unconsidered background to technological society” (Plumwood, 2003, p. 57). Outdoor education experiences are made available by places with their own unique mix of cultural and natural history. In many cases such experiences are contingent upon the specifics of a place, not free of them. Without specifying which place in ‘nature’ we imply that any bit of nature will do, as long as it submits to our desire to connect to it.

As we have seen with the Murray, the eurocentric model of understanding and relating to the land has been an ecological failure in Australia. Plumwood (2000) argues that it makes good sense for non-indigenous Australians to learn from indigenous about how to relate to and understand the land without appropriating their knowledge. In order to do so, however, she suggests that:

a narrative project of sensitivity to place requires discarding the mechanistic, reductionist and human-centred conceptual frameworks that strip intentionality and thereby narrative subjecthood from the land and from non-humans generally. Human self-enclosure that denies subject positioning to all but the human vastly contracts the range of subjects and possible narratives that give meaning and richness to place. Human-centredness reduces the land to a passive and neutral surface for the inscription of human projects (Plumwood, 2000, p. 99).

Deepening understanding that nature is not one thing requires attention to the detail of, and the differences between, places. It also requires attention to the way language may shape understanding of the landscape. Arthur (2003) highlights that “colonization is an event in language as well as in space” (p. 17). A good example of this may be found in the way the concept of a ‘river’ and understandings of water have been applied to Australia since settlement. The Murray, like many Australian waterways, did not conform to the European concept of nature. The Murray flows inland for much of its length, and prior to settlement had an irregular and unpredictable flow, which did not fit the European notion of a river (Carter, 1987; Sinclair, 2001). The fact that many Australian rivers don’t flow to the sea further confounded early Europeans. Arthur (2003) observes that “colonists cannot place the word [river] on the landscape; it won’t fit” (p. 18). Settlers along the Murray, and numerous other dryland rivers of Australia, set about transforming it to fit their desires and expectations, rather than change their understanding of how a river may behave.

Goodall (2002), observing the relationship between people, landscape and language of the upper Darling offers the insight:

Floods and rivers have created the land on the floodplain, and water is the continuing shaping force. Language fulfils a similar active and creative linking between the land, the waters and all the people involved. Like water, the creative role of language is never simple. It may not run clear and transparent, nor give a direct reflection. It might be as obscure as muddy water and it might refract and distort rather than simply transmit ideas and feelings. Nevertheless, language not only records

people's empirical observations of the countryside, it offers some evidence, like bubbles on the surface, tracing out the creative ways people have tried to make sense out of their relationships with their environment within their social and cultural contexts" (p. 37).

We continue to expect the Murray to behave, or perform, in predictable ways that fit our desires, hopes and expectations, but as Goodall (2002) points out, rivers on flood plains, which is a substantial part of the Murray, are not fixed, for they move out beyond their banks. Discussing a section of the upper Darling (a major tributary of the Murray), Goodall (2002) observes that "rivers are not simple or singular on any floodplain. They meander and split and form webs of interconnecting channels, creating a delta. In such a place, there is a complex and dynamic relation between land and water, because, on a floodplain, it is water which creates and replenishes the land and soil" (p. 36).

For much of the Murray, the capacity to flood is a life sustaining necessity, yet it has been transformed to minimize its capacity to do so. It is an intriguing paradox that the Murray's capacity to flood, which played a significant role in shaping the landscape that attracted European settlers, has been minimised to the extent that it is arguably no longer the same river (Sinclair, 2001). Further example of how language leaves 'traces' of how people understand their environment is to be found in the phrase 'breaking its banks'. When the river is in flood it is commonly described as 'breaking its banks', which implies that flooding is wrong or an aberration.

Like the concept of a river, our understanding of water seems out of place for this dry continent. 'Whitefella water-dreaming', as Powell (2000) calls it, has been "deeply implicated in the conceptualisation, design and refashioning of the great land-use belts, as well as in many of the finer details of landscape change" (p. 68). Adams (2003) observes that "colonial enthusiasm for the large-scale re-ordering of nature is seen most clearly in the area of water resources" (p. 23). Water has become commodified, turned into a resource like other aspects of the natural world. "At the hands of colonial engineers, wild nature was brought under control, its power harnessed (literally, in the form of hydro-electric power) to serve the grand purposes of colonial development" (Adams, 2003, p. 24).

That Australian cultural understanding of the landscape continues to be out of step with the reality of the country can be seen in current debates in popular media regarding how to drought proof the country (see for example Edmund, 2004). Outdoor education, to some extent, benefits from and continues to support the ill-fitting European concepts of how aspects of the landscape ought behave. For example, canoeing on the Murray all year round is made possible by the many dams and weirs that control and regulate water levels. Without reference to how the river once looked and behaved how are the uninitiated to know of its radical transformation?

I will make one more point regarding the colonial influence on concepts of nature in relation to the Murray. Topographic maps of the Murray, while useful, are in a sense, grossly misleading and continue the colonial subjugation of the river. While in one sense, topographic maps are a representation of the river at a given moment in time and space, they also represent the riverscape as we (Australians of colonial decent) think it ought look and behave. Its height, width, colour, smell and taste are all highly variable yet a map represents the river as singular and unchanging. Sinclair (2001) notes, for example, that each river that joins the Murray adds its own unique sediments and colour. Its name, the 'Murray', inscribed on each map is also misleading. While it is possible to travel downstream on the same continuous

stretch of water, a river of such prodigious length, traversing some many different environments, cannot be one river, but rather many. The aboriginal practice of naming a section of a river relative to how it behaves and is understood seems more appropriate⁴.

Building connections with the Murray

In the process of build experiences of the Murray that attempt to connect students with the socio-ecological state of the river I am mindful of the debate between environmental philosophers regarding understandings of place, land and belonging in Australia. In *Belonging: Australians, place and aboriginal ownership* Peter Read (2000) explores the sense of belonging individual non-indigenous Australians have developed with the land. Read, through personal interview and analysis of music, poetry, art and history, seeks to shed some light on the complex question of how non-indigenous Australians might deepen their understanding and attachment to the land. Discussing the differences between indigenous and non-indigenous sense of belonging, he writes:

Leave the spirits to the people who made them or were made by them. Let the rest of us find the confidence in our own physical and spiritual belonging in this land, respectful of Aboriginality but not necessarily close to it. Let's intuit our own attachments to country independently of Aboriginals. We can belong in the landscape, on the landscape, or irrelevantly to the landscape. We don't have to all have to belong to each other. To understand that is a step to belonging (p. 204).

In contrast to Read, Val Plumwood (2000), in 'Belonging, naming, and decolonisation', argues that individual connections with, or belonging to, the land that are independent of indigenous understandings would be 'fake'; that any personal understanding needs to be in relation to historical and cultural context, of which an individual is a part. Plumwood (ibid.), reviewing Read, finds his lack of critical appraisal of western understandings of the land particularly problematic:

Read's overall approach... is to posit an existing form of non-indigenous land or place attachment... that can be developed independently of indigenous Australians, without reliance on any form of direct or indirect guidance from them. This approach enables Read to avoid any systematic comparison of the two cultures in relation to land sensibility along with any critical assessment of mainstream Australian, or indeed western, land ethics and cultures... It bypasses any systematic discussion of land ethics, and the major critiques of western models of land culture and ethics developed in disciplines such as environmental philosophy and critical anthropology. In doing so it privatises the issues and lends covert support to the idea that the dominant model is adequate, is getting there, or will get there without major change (p. 93).

Plumwood (2000) argues that most non-indigenous Australians inherit "disbelonging", an active state or process of denying certain kinds of ties and origins, especially to the earth. She suggests that "to make philosophical progress on the problem of achieving better cultural relationships to land and place, we need to put some effort into identifying and removing structural obstacles to developing mutually enhancing land relationships" (p. 97).

As an educator wishing to aid students in understanding and developing connection with parts of the Murray I find the insights of both Read and Plumwood compelling. Despite Plumwood's criticisms, I find a strong resonance between Read's exploration of personal connections with place and what I have observed of students as they develop understanding of the river. Yet, I also agree with Plumwood's discussion of non-indigenous Australians

learning from indigenous understandings of the land and the need to address the ‘structural obstacles to developing mutually enhancing land relationships’. I have found the writing of John Cameron (2003a; 2003b), who is also attempting to develop place sensitive and responsive education, to be valuable in shedding light on this discussion. Cameron (2003a) comments that “the central role for place education in any movement toward a sustainable society has been well established... Individual *and* collective learning need to take place, from experience *and* critical awareness of the structural issues, and both have to be included in an ethical place education” (p. 113). Outdoor education, as a form of place education, would appear to me to have a significant role, and responsibility, in placing individual experiences and learning into a broader ‘collective’ learning about how to relate to, and understand, Australian places.

In building experiences of the Murray I have sought to connect students, in an emotional and experiential manner, to the river, but also place the experience in a conceptual framework that develops ‘critical awareness’ of the plight of the river, and addresses the ‘structural’ issues of how the river is engaged with and understood. Conversely, I fear that an experience of the river that is primarily about the participants and activity, without reference to the river as an entity with its own life, meaning and health, (that may be separate from humans and at the same time whose short-medium term future is inexplicably linked to humans) becomes an act of appropriation, that we risk incorporating the river into our selfhood and culture (as masters) (Plumwood, 1993), and the river is again colonised. An experience of the river, therefore, becomes a process of engaging the emotions and intellect in order to develop understanding of the place. Deepening understanding of place is not straightforward or particularly easy, as both Plumwood (2000) and Mulligan (2003) observe. Plumwood (2000) remarks that “high levels of urbanisation and mobility discourage deep contact with the non-human aspects of place. These require time in that place, time for experience of seasonal change, and time to make contact with its non-human voices. And time is increasingly what we lack” (p. 98). While the experiences I generate of the river are not ‘experience of seasonal change’ they do allow for slowing down, being in and observing the cultural and natural history stories of a place. ‘Deepening into’ place, as Mulligan (2003) comments, also “...takes effort, as well as attentiveness and empathy. It involves the building of skills that subsequently enable the practitioner to deepen into more than one place” (p. 285). In observing students, I have become aware that building ‘place attentive skills’, such as ‘reading’ the environmental history of a place (see for example Slattery, 2001), requires patience and a willingness to see these skills as equally important to the experience as activity competency. The rewards for developing these skills are substantial, as Mulligan (2003) notes: “if we enhance our skills in becoming attentive and empathetic, then we will once again rediscover that every single place in the world is unique in both human and non-human terms, and that every place has a ‘magic’ of its own” (p. 284).

The Murray has its own stories of how it has changed and evolved over time. By engaging with the health of the river, through building experience around the stories of human and non-human aspects of the place, I’m attempting to challenge colonial understandings of ‘nature’. As any experience of place carries hidden messages of how to relate to and understand the surrounding world (Brookes, 1998), the challenge for me as an educator is reveal the river in a way that places personal experience into broader collective understanding of the land. Mulligan (2003) observes that “... knowledge of stories associated with places we pass through can help us to feel better oriented, more constantly ‘connected’. A sense of belonging extends from the local to the regional and beyond, and a sense of belonging can

lead to a stronger sense of responsibility” (p. 278). Experience of the river becomes a means to place personal reflections of the river into a broader cultural understanding on the river.

Giving voice to the river: personal experiences placed in a cultural context

In the stimulating book *From landscape to literature: the river and the myth of geography* Wyman Herendeen (1986) argues that describing a river is no easy task. Herendeen proffers that a river is more difficult to describe than a stone, tree or mountain because it gives the appearance of continually changing, in time and space. Describing an experience of a river is equally challenging when faced with the question of what to include and exclude. The intention here, therefore, is not to describe an experience of the river in detail but to draw on a few student reflections to highlight the capacity for personal experience to be placed in broader cultural context.

To know particular parts of the Murray isn't the same as knowing all of the river, or all rivers for that matter. The Murray being approximately 2600km long the choice of which section to travel is an interesting issue. My early introductions to the Murray as a place to canoe were in the Barmah Forest. This is a beautiful section of the river where it is possible to paddle along looking out into the forest. As a result of the river's geological history in this section the banks are very low and the forest floods easily. This area is, however, an atypical section of the river; it can, to the uninitiated, provide a sense of 'wilderness', the bush largely untouched by settlement. The concept of 'wilderness' carries some connotations that are antithetical to decolonising understandings of place in Australia. Sinclair (2001), for example, notes that modern ideas of wilderness leave humans outside nature, and nature outside history. Brookes (2001), reflecting on tourist experiences of the Franklin River in Tasmania, asserts that the construction of nature as 'wilderness' makes a virtue of disengagement and estrangement from place. Langton (1998 in Mulligan, 2003) has made the point that "Australian environmentalists inadvertently sustain the legacy of *terra nullis* when they use terms such as 'wilderness' in ways that deny Aboriginal occupation of the land" (p. 276). The act of seeking out wilderness, a place seemingly untouched by humans, without reference to history of others, becomes an act of colonialism; it denies the history of others, regardless of their ethnicity or indigeneity, and limits the capacity for developing understanding of place as part of our everyday lives, one we might have connection with, concern and care for. (Adams, 2003)⁵.

With this in mind, I have more recently chosen to take students to sections of the river where it is easier to see the impact of settlement and the declining health of the river. These areas are still beautiful, alive places but signs of human disturbance are more obvious. One such area is the section immediately upstream of the Port of Echuca. The transition from a forest-clad river to town can be striking...

Silently, I drift through the murky water with my group. I felt alien to the surrounds we had just entered [the township of Echuca]. This must have been what it was like for the Europeans that first settled on these lands. However, this time I'd come from a natural landscape to feel alien in a developed one. This historical port was built by them to escape the exact landscape I'd been thriving in for the past two days. Enormous paddle steamers, that made our canoes look like ants, journeyed past while commentary blared from their loud speakers to accommodate the crowds of tourists. I wondered if any of them understood the strife our existence had put on the livelihood of

this river. Or, if they did whether they considered it to be only natural that the landscape should change as much as it has in the last 200 years (Ivy).

Another section I have visited with students is downstream of Echuca at the Torrumbarry Weir. Visiting a weir and going through a lock can provide a window on the paradox of travelling down the river by canoe. Before European settlement the river would have gone through periods of wet and dry, yet today we can visit the river at any time of the year and be assured of enough water to travel on. Similarly, locks and weirs may have a negative impact on the health of the river but they are intriguing to visit and fun to travel through...

It wasn't until I saw the Torrumbarry Weir that I actually saw the impact agriculture has had on the river. This magnificent structure was amazing. It was strong and noble, how can anyone have negative thoughts about such a tremendous structure? Yet, the difference between the river environment above and below the weir was unbelievable. Above, where the water was banked up and surrounded by country with trees was totally diverse, whereas below the weir, the banks of the river were 3 metres high and surrounded by bare paddocks, devastating (Jen).

For Tom, the difference between the back waters of the weir and the river downstream were similarly striking...

The high water and nonexistent banks [of the weir] made it feel like I was paddling on another river, simply because there was no echo. Sounds just travelled out into the neighbouring forests instead of bouncing back off the 5m high walls... Just looking at Torrumbarry Weir and seeing the difference in water levels makes you think WOW! But when you paddle into the adjacent lock and physically drop 6m, the WOW factor gets higher as I realise the amount of water being held back is massive. The look, shape and feel of the river returned to a familiar state as the flow is returned. The high banks are present and I don't have to paddle as much. Ah, until the next weir anyway!

The nature of the experience, being in a canoe, quietly drifting or paddling, solo or in small groups, with particular readings and guided discussion on the health and history of the river can prompt reflection on who 'owns' the river...

Being on the river instead of viewing it from its banks made me feel like I was more a part of the River instead of being separate from it. Being in this new environment, however, I found it hard to adjust my eyes to view the negative things about it. So I asked myself these questions – who owns the Murray's water if anyone at all and do I think the River is natural or unnatural due to its regulated form? Slowly I realised that the water I was paddling on was totally manipulated by man (Chloe).

Experience prompting thought on being a part of the surrounding world, rather than apart from it, is a recurring theme...

I'm sitting on the inside of a bend in the river. It was here where we camped last night. Across the river is a wall of clay, approx 3m in height. The river width is about 60m across. Bull rush and other rushes grow intermittently where I sit. I woke this morning to the sound of birds. Galahs, Cockatoos and an assortment of other bird sounds. I lay there and listened for a while. Even though I was still inside my tent the sound, and knowing where I was felt good. This is the experience of being on the river, beside it, or in the bush. The wind on one's face, the fresh air, the sounds of wind, leaves, birds, or maybe a distant call. Seeing the complexity of nature; the trees, shrubs, grasses and reeds and how the wildlife use it. This is all part of the experience of the bush, being part of it (John).

For some students, an experience of the river may bring back memories of previous visits to the Murray. The contrast of a place sensitive experience and these memories may lead to understanding of the connection between use of the river and its health...

As we pulled up to the banks of the Murray and I stepped off the bus for the first time thoughts of adrenalin, fun and racing passed through my head. These thoughts came from past experiences I have had of the Murray. For me in the past I have used the Murray's water for recreational kayaking, racing and camping. Not once did I ever think about other water uses or how this water arrives here. To me it was just a place I could go to paddle my kayak, have fun then go home all free of charge. I also think this is how most people see the Murray. But in my older age now I am a bit wiser and respect all rivers for what they provide me with and understand that we must contribute something back (Aaron).

Childhood memories in particular appear to provide a strong reference point for understanding the river. Paula articulates disappointment at the loss of innocence that accompanies being more aware of the condition of the river...

I cannot remember the first time I went to the Murray River, I must have been young. We used to camp near Morgan's Beach at Barmah or at Ned's Corner near Mildura for a couple of weeks over summer. Coming from south Gippsland, this part of Victoria was another world to me. It was hot. I spent my 4th birthday camping by the Murray, and although I only remember it vaguely, I've got photos and I'm pretty sure I had a good time. My memories of the Murray as a child, like other holidays, are the best. These are good memories of exploring and spending endless hours in the river's warm waters on the hottest days. The sun was hot on my skin and I got so burnt, the mozzies at night bit my little sister lots but bit me only a bit, I still remember the smell of our old tent which was so hot during the day you could not stand it, my clothes reeked of campfire smoke and dust, my hair un-mistakeably of Murray water... The next time I visited the Murray was in first year, at Gunbower. This was when all these strong childhood memories came back to me, after learning about how childhood experiences shape people's connection with place and how they perceive and care for place. Paddling on the River in first year gave me a different experience of the River, my experience was influenced by the people I was with on the trip, what we talked about, the mode of travel, and how we 'lived' on the River. The 'River Environments' trips were similar and I felt like I have been getting to know the River really well, especially its history. Spending time on and around it, learning more about it. Realising more and more, it's a river in a cage, it's frustrated it can't get out and it's getting more sick everyday in that cage. It can't be itself. I want to let it out but I can't. I feel cheated, (now that I understand about river regulation) I feel like those childhood memories were false, the river should have hardly been there over summer, I was swimming in a river of lies, it wasn't and isn't a healthy and happy river as it may appear (Paula).

By way of conclusion...

Camping beside the river, waking to the sounds of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos screeching excitedly, drifting downstream observing changes to the riverbanks, reading about the lives of others, and contemplating the connection between our community, culture, society, the river, and our experiences help give the river voice, help us listen, to hear the river and its story. Understanding a place, the river, isn't just about our experience of it but also the cultural meanings we may take with us about how we might relate to places or landforms. The act of going to the river and engaging with the socio-ecological state of the river becomes a means to challenge, not perpetuate, the colonial notion that the country is free of prior ownership, stories and history. Personal experience also needs to be seen in relation to broader cultural

understandings of place. Sinclair (2001) reminds me that “what is missing from many popular representations of the Murray’s degradation is an awareness of how the cultural and economic forces that justified the Murray’s transformation continue to influence management and popular attitudes” (p. 20).

In Australia we are still learning ways to relate to and make meaning of our connections with our places. Some ways of being ‘in place’ that we utilise are not respectful of the place or intuitive of what a place may offer us, physically, emotionally and spiritually. I agree with Mulligan (2003) when he suggests that “we need to overcome the colonial legacy of ‘mastery over’, not only because it has been profoundly repressive towards subjugated people, but also because it has left us profoundly alienated from the natural world” (p. 287). Awareness is growing about the need to develop Australian ways of being in place (see for example Plumwood, 2000; Read, 2000; Seddon, 1997) but this appears to be slow in trickling into formal education (see for example Brookes, 2002b; Cameron, 2003a, 2003b). While my desire is to resist the temptation to universalise the discussion in this paper for all of outdoor education, I offer one final comment. There is no ‘one size fits all’ pattern that can be applied to developing place responsive and sensitive education to challenge colonial understandings of nature and the land. However, one guideline appears to hold true: deepening understanding and relationships with place, through experience, needs to be guided by the particular issues, community and people of the physical place. Without acknowledging the complexities of each place our educational experiences run the risk of becoming bland and meaningless.

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¹ The detail of these experiences have been discussed elsewhere; see Stewart (in press).

² 'We' in this context refers to non-indigenous Australians of European heritage.

³ While these authors may in practice develop place sensitive and responsive experiences, my concern is the way experience is conceptualised and articulated in the literature.

⁴ Val Pumwood (2000; 2003) argues that colonial names express particular politics, world views and are an act of dispossession. She advocates renaming much of the country as an act of decolonisation and reconciliation.

⁵ That is not to say that places with little European disturbance need to be avoided, but rather the history and stories of previous inhabitants need to be incorporated into to an educational experience.

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