

Critical Outdoor Education and Nature as a Friend

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Introduction

The Marshall Islands consists of 29 atolls and 1225 islets scattered over three quarters of a million square miles of Pacific ocean. In response to research that shows global warming due to greenhouse gases will raise sea levels and inundate many of the islands, the Marshall Islands has developed a total population evacuation plan. As a member of the Association of Small Island States (AOSIS) they have been lobbying industrialised nations to support a worldwide reduction of 20% in greenhouse gas emissions (compared to 1990 levels). The US is aiming for stabilisation at 1990 levels by 2010, Japan a 5% reduction by the year 2010. (Nuttall 1997. p. 4)

Australia, an island less threatened by sea level rises, claims the best it can achieve by the year 2010, is an 18% *increase* from 1990 levels. While the Australian Government has developed strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, it seems that there exists a deep reluctance to curtail or modify activity which contributes to economic growth albeit at an environmental cost. Australia is not ignorant of environmental imperatives, rather “countries like Australia have a cultural momentum and economic interdependence with other countries that make impediments to economic growth unthinkable,” (Beder 1993, p. xi). ‘The Lucky Country’ has enormous natural resources, including fossil fuel deposits, which can only contribute to the gross domestic product if they are exploited.

Despite the Australian Government’s stance on greenhouse emissions, Australians do have a concern for environmental issues. A 1994 survey canvassed opinions concerning environmental problems; results indicated the two most commonly cited concerns were air and ocean pollution (34% and 26% of the population respectively). The greenhouse effect was an issue for only 9% of the population. (A.B.S. 1994, p.7) In Australia 85.3% of the population live in urban settings, most commonly on the coastal fringe (A.B.S. 1996). Air and ocean pollution have an immediate connection to the life quality of Australians in a way similar to the links between greenhouse warming and the residents of the Marshall Islands. The direct connection between lived experience and environmental concern is to be expected; important implications for education outdoors are also evident.

What role for outdoor education?

The significant contribution of outdoor education to education is something I have pondered for some time (Martin 1993a). As a beginning teacher I can clearly remember justifying outdoor activities in terms of individual growth outcomes for students. Outdoor activities offered students an opportunity to experience success at physical

endeavours and broaden their recreation or leisure options. Often kids less suited to competitive team sports would do well at outdoor activities: skills around the camp, with a compass, paddle, or feel for the bush, didn't fall all with the gifted school athlete. Personal development outcomes are still considered a major rationale for outdoor education's place in schooling, its popularity with students, and application to fields as diverse as corporate management and at risk youth.

Although none of the personal development benefits of outdoor education have changed, in the light of mounting evidence that environmental problems of global dimensions have developed and that human economically driven activity is a primary cause, I would argue that outdoor education should have a primary role in educating for environmentally sustainable living. The pollution Australians care about now is the visible pollution that impacts upon their lives. Australians could also care more about natural settings if experiences in the outdoors became more a part of their personal life experiences.

Since 1992 Outdoor Education has been a part of the formal education on offer in schools in the southern Australian state of Victoria. A higher secondary school certificate subject, Outdoor Education has a "Human Development" focus.

"The primary focus of Outdoor Education is on understanding people's relationships with the outdoors. In developing an understanding of this relationship some matters will be learned through direct experience outdoors, while some will be learned in the classroom.

... The activities selected should enable the students to develop a sympathetic understanding of nature and should specifically exclude the use of weapons (archery, target shooting) or mechanical devices which replace human effort (trail bikes, water skiing, jet skis).

(Board of Studies 1994 p. 5)

[A human development approach seeks to help students understand their own participation in outdoor activities] "in its broader cultural and historical context and assists students to reflect on the complex range of influences which structure everyday life."

(VCAB 1992 p.10)

It is in this broader cultural and historical context that outdoor education content which I consider unique and defensible can evolve. It is an education well suited to the coming millennium.

Problems associated with ethnic, gender, and class inequities are indeed daunting, and deserve immediate attention... the current debate over what constitutes appropriate education ... for the accelerating rate of technological innovation indeed involves important issues. But if the thinking that guides educational reform does not take into account how the cultural beliefs and practices passed on through schooling relate to the deepening ecological crisis, then these efforts may

actually strengthen the cultural orientation that is undermining the sustaining capacities of natural systems upon which all life depends. (Bowers 1993 p.1)

Any education that takes place in, or concerns the use of, the natural environment must surely embrace Bower's comments to the greatest possible extent. Learning from outdoor adventure, outdoor recreation and outdoor education needs to go beyond consideration of the superficial aspects of minimising impact. What I like to call *critical Outdoor Education* can contribute distinctively to education for the planet, by focussing on the cultural beliefs and practices that may be contributing to the ecological crisis. (Outdoor Education may also assist in addressing educational dilemmas associated with ethnic, gender and class inequities, but these are not the focus of this essay.)

One readily identifiable aspect of school based outdoor education is that it has traditionally sought to leave the confines of the school, for several days at a time, and has had students engaged in adventure activities in a natural setting. Students have liked it for that. Time in the bush can let students begin to understand themselves, others and nature in a different way. It can help students to develop a different, often critical, perspective on society. I am careful here to say 'can help', because outdoor activities can as easily reinforce exploitive patriarchal values as they can help develop a critical perspective.

Critical Theory in Outdoor Education

One of the academic bases which can be of assistance here in helping outdoor education to offer a different perspective on outdoor recreation activity is critical theory. Critical theory is concerned with social justice issues. It is a perspective which argues that all action is either maintaining or resisting the dominant social order (Giroux 1983). Critical outdoor education is aimed at examining outdoor recreation and environmental issues in light of their relationship to the dominant social order.

For critical outdoor education, the central issue is humanity's relationship with the outdoors (or nature). Critical outdoor education would accept that there exist both local and global environmental crises, and that social and environmental injustice are both a cause and consequence of these crises. Critical outdoor education would examine outdoor recreation beliefs and practices in terms of whether they maintain or resist the dominant historical human nature relationship: one of exploitation.

The dominant western social order, of which we are a part, is built on: excessive faith in scientific rationalism; has human rather than nature centred priorities; holds individualistic rather than community goals; and has an unswerving belief in progress typified by technological innovation (Chenery 1994). Feminist critiques also tie the western mindset to a patriarchal system of beliefs and attitudes (Plumwood 1993). In such a world, women, nature, and knowledge other than the scientific are subordinate or hold less value.

So why Outdoor Education and critical theory?

... The conceptual basis of industrial society has been based on assumptions that, if we continue to live by them, will further accelerate the rate of environmental damage ... In effect, the evidence of environmental disruption and system breakdown is a clear message that our most basic cultural assumptions are going to have to be re-examined and, in many instances, reconstituted in ways that take into account the interdependence of culture and natural environment. (Bowers and Flinders 1990, p.249)

Re-examining and in some instances reconstituting basic cultural assumptions will never be an easy task. The task becomes even more difficult when a critique is conducted while fully immersed in the culture under scrutiny. Critical outdoor education can construct an alternate reality or community so that some of the taken for granted assumptions of everyday living become slightly more visible. What is important on a long bushwalk, a climbing trip, or a downriver journey is seldom the same set of imperatives as those that demand attention in everyday living. Critical outdoor education can enable students to understand that central aspects of our lives which we take for granted, are actually social constructions of our own doing; many of the things we regard as important are dependant on contexts, time and space. As the critical theorist Giroux (1983, p.8) explains,

Money, consumption, distribution and production ... do not represent objective facts or things, but (are) historically contingent contexts mediated by relationships of domination and subordination.

What critical outdoor education tries to do is raise students' awareness of understandings about our society which have previously gone unacknowledged. Critical outdoor education goes to the bush, not just to recreate and have fun, but to look back with a critical perspective at the contexts left behind, particularly to those sets of beliefs which help shape human nature relationships.

Human nature relationships

The argument for outdoor education to concern itself fundamentally with human nature relationships is compelling. The global and local environmental crises we currently face are those born of a culture that has lost its sense of connectedness with nature. As a culture we have taken the words of Genesis to have "...dominion over the earth" to "subdue ... and multiply..." too literally. In decision making at all levels of government economic 'imperatives' hold sway over environmental concerns. One distinctive and worthy path is for critical outdoor education to concern itself primarily with establishing or perhaps re-establishing, a sense of personal relatedness to nature.

Wendel Berry (1992) comments on the importance of this relatedness.

A culture capable of preserving land and people can be made only within a relatively stable and enduring relationship between local people and place. (Berry 1992, p.171)

(As an aside: the need for relatedness raises serious questions for any education interested in promoting environmental understanding and activism. How can students act on environmental problems or issues for which they have no connectedness or personal experience? Basically I don't think they can. Failure to act on environmental issues due to a lack of relatedness is recognised by the advocates of bioregionalism who argue that direct immediate connections and relationships to place are fundamental to "right" behaviour. (Sale 1991, p. 53))

To help in developing a direct personal relationship with nature my teaching outdoors is guided by the metaphor, 'to know nature as a friend'. It is one of the models my students consider in the classroom as well as the bush. Deep ecology, Judeo-Christian images, early European beliefs, and media portrayals, offer other human / nature models which are useful in developing the realisation that how we relate to nature is problematic and a social construction. Power relationships between people and place differ in these models. Although to consider 'nature as a friend' still places humans separate from nature, it does treat nature as a subject, not an object and is a model I find students can more easily understand. It also has interesting implications for the way outdoor education is practiced.

Nature as a friend

The dominant behaviour I have in the relationship with my friends is underscored by respect and caring; the source of knowledge about respect and caring, is mostly intuitive, receptive and based on experience. The philosopher Nel Noddings, in her work on ethical caring between people, suggests that caring, empathy and relatedness underlies much of women's ways of knowing.

Women... define themselves in terms of caring and work their way through moral problems from the position of one caring (Noddings 1984, p.8)

Noddings' position of "one caring" is typified by a person who is motivated to act in the interests of another. I believe human nature interactions can share qualitative similarities with the interactions between humans as described by Noddings. In so doing, adopting the "position of one caring" when concerned with the moral problems associated with the environment (as opposed to an economic rationalist position) would represent a major shift in thinking: a shift consistent with the concept of regarding specific environments more personally as a close friend. However, we need to move beyond philosophy into practice, a point argued by Simpson. "The problem now lies not in the lack of the philosophical discussion about the environment, but in a failure to translate such philosophy into useful action." (1996, p.14).

The practical implications of critical outdoor education which approaches nature as a friend are many- implications in terms of: the knowledge held to be important, the content selected to be taught, the teaching processes employed, the venues identified as appropriate, the learning outcomes emphasised. Implied in this summarising list is the central role of the teacher in shaping learning experiences. While I am certain that students construct their own learning outcomes, I am equally convinced of the need for

teachers to acknowledge the important moral responsibility and influence they accept in the selection of teaching strategies and program content. Part of that responsibility is recognising that a “nature as a friend” metaphor can be extended and developed as an image of human nature relationships to pervade an entire program, indeed a whole way of living.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss the practical implications of teaching outdoors guided by the metaphor of “nature as a friend”.

The knowledge held to be important

Consciously and subconsciously as teachers and leaders we give credibility to particular types of knowledge. For the last 400 years rational objectivity has been the dominant way of thinking that has been valued by Western culture. Rational objectivity underscores much of today’s technological advancement, much of which is of great benefit to humans. Emotion and sentiment are not part of rational objectivity. Traditional schooling holds rational objectivity to be most valued. I grew up being reminded by both parents and teachers to “think rationally, ...leave your emotions out of it, ...don’t cloud your thinking with emotion. Be objective!” In contrast; to treat or conceive of nature as a friend demands that emotions be recognised and nurtured. If Western culture is to redress the environmental harm induced by technological, rational thinking, then educators need to accept and foster more balanced ways of understanding the world.

In the outdoors it is easy to recognise and reify a diversity of ways of knowing. Getting to know nature as a friend challenges the dominance of rational objectivity and encourages students to acknowledge the importance of experiential, tacit or emotional responses to the outdoors.

Experiential knowing becomes important in the outdoors, it’s the core around which outdoors people build competence and skill mastery. Experiential knowledge can also be a meaningful way to know outdoor environments. The knowledge of the Mt Arapiles cliffs because I have climbed there is very different from the geological knowledge I can derive from reading a text or studying the rock strata. I have argued previously that rockclimbing itself can be a powerful and personally significant way to know.(Martin 1993b) The feel of rock, the way it’s shaped, cracked and formed is something every climber recognises as particular to specific places and climbs. To give another example - Polynesian navigators can accurately discern landmass and direction by interpreting detailed knowledge of star patterns or through interpretation of wave sequences felt while lying in the bottom of boats floating on open ocean. Described by Howard Gardner as typical of “spatial intelligence”, the navigator’s experiential knowledge is almost untenable to the rational mind. (Gardner et al 1996) Significantly for critical outdoor education, experiential knowledge builds relatedness, and it is relatedness that is of prime importance in determining the degree of compassion and action in caring. (Noddings 1984)

Contained within the wisdom of experience is tacit knowing as described by Polanyi (1966). Polanyi recognises that “we can know far more than we can tell.” (1966, p. 4)

This knowledge that comes from experience may not be able to be articulated, but it is certainly real. Tacit knowing also reminds me that written reflections or post trip discussions can never consolidate all that is learned. Being satisfied as a teacher that sometimes the experience itself is significant learning, without the need for deconstruction or re-interpretation, is worth remembering.

Intuitive knowledge is also something most outdoor educators acknowledge. Numerous accounts exist of mountaineers sensing and responding to intuitive hunches or “feelings” prior to incidents such as avalanches or rockfall. Intuition may have its roots in tacit knowing also. Again recognising the importance and validity of intuitive knowledge is something outdoor leaders can acknowledge during teaching. In leading groups outdoors I often get a sense of aspects such as weather changes, immanent hazards or group dynamic issues. Often I attempt to make that intuition more public by thinking aloud to students.

Students easily grasp the significance of more personal responses in nature as valid ways to know; to many it comes as a relief, (perhaps similar in a way to the mountaineers of the late 1800s who eventually worked up the courage to climb mountains for other than scientific rationales). However acknowledging experiential, tacit and intuitive knowledge is not just an easy escape route from rigorous thought. Rational thought is not discarded, but rather becomes another mode of consciousness to which students refer. This blending of both rational and emotive thought is what Belenky et al (1986) in a study of women’s ways of knowing describes as indicative of the most intelligent thinkers, whom she called “constructed knowers” (p.131). Similarly, Fritjof Capra in discussing the distinction between science and philosophy considers a synthesising central ground between the rational thinking and sensory perception of science and the intuitive, spiritual and inner experience of philosophy as the most valued of ways of thinking. “Idealistic” is the term he coins for the coming together of these ways of knowing. (in Simpson 1996. p. 15)

Experiential knowledge, tacit knowing and intuitive knowledge are all valid additional sources of evidence in decision making. That students understand the ideas associated with different ways of knowing, is vital to critical outdoor education that seeks to establish validity in the power of place and personal relatedness with nature. Students need to know that it is perfectly acceptable to describe a personal relationship with place that is a blend of both rational objective knowledge, and personal, tacit or experiential knowledge. (The knowledge and love of my partner and children is no less real or valued a form of knowledge for not always being rational and objective.)

In the larger scheme of things, a culture that recognised the inherent value of human nature relationships in other than rational objective (economic) terms would certainly be moving toward adopting the environmental ethic that Leopold sought so many years ago.

No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections and convictions” (Leopold 1949 p.246)

I have emphasised this blending of rationality and emotion because I consider it pivotal to the development of a relationship with nature that moves beyond the instrumental distanced relationship of the objective scientist, yet remains more grounded than the blind romantic. The importance of this constructed way of knowing is also evident in consideration of teaching content and processes.

The content selected to be taught

Teaching and leading will always be a moral endeavour. What I determine to be important enough to teach is a decision I do not take lightly, especially when student safety, environmental wellbeing and scarce resources are at risk. As an ethical nonconsequentialist (Hunt 1993, p.19) the content I select for critical outdoor education guided by getting to know nature as a friend must support the ends of environmental connectedness and empathy.

Friendships develop over time as people gain personal knowledge and mutual experience. In the human nature relationship there seems little difference. Essential content needs to include the skills to enable students to remain at ease and comfortable in the outdoors. Bush living skills and specific outdoor activity skills become a means to enable a familiarity and friendship to flourish, rather than a collective of potential leisure options. In getting to know nature, the emphasis of activity skills becomes one of functional mobility and acquaintance, rather than technical improvement and the beating of challenges. For example; rockclimbing skills still need to be safely learned, but a multipitch climb up a long exposed but easy ridge is more appropriate to meeting a cliff as a friend, than is a short technically difficult problem. Similarly, crosscountry ski touring needs to enable students to comfortably explore the winter high country; it doesn't matter if they can't ski as fast or as efficiently as those wearing lycra suits closer to the ski resort.

Some outdoor activities invite students to return to the one place, repeatedly, others are built upon novelty and exploration. My teaching outdoors favours the return to familiar places. As a climber I have been climbing at the same cliff for hundreds of days over the past 20 years, I feel I have come to know that cliff intimately as a result. I think that content which captures student's interest by relying primarily on novelty, is not helping them understand the importance of their relationship with place.

I also consider the history of the places students visit to be important content. What has the mountain seen and known before we met? What other inhabitants share the bushland with the students and what is some of their history and relationships? To climb at Mt Arapiles and know nothing of the indigenous inhabitants relationships, beliefs and knowledge, the early European settlers, the skinks and stumpy tail lizards, the early landform and remnant coastal vegetation, is akin to trying to get to know a friend without inquiring about their family or other life history. The history of a place then, is essential content of critical outdoor education. The twist that critical outdoor education adds to this content is that the experiences and influences related to Mt Arapiles are understood in terms of how they shaped and moulded the Arapiles I know today. Further, what in

this history has served Arapiles well and what has altered it significantly? Importantly from a critical outdoor education perspective, how do I determine what is good and bad in this history, and by what criteria?

It is clear that much of the content of teaching human nature relationships must be the experiences in the outdoors themselves. Experiential knowledge is fundamental to the development of human human relationships . The extent to which people are motivated to *act* in caring is primarily determined by the degree of relatedness. (Noddings 1984) That is to say, we are more likely to act to help a person if we are connected or associated with them in some way. There is no reason to think otherwise for human nature relationships. Students build associations and connections to place and therefore a motivation to act and care, through specific experience.

There is also content in the personal responses to place that students feel. Different places, and variations in weather at the same place, seem to create different moods. It is important to recognise and consider these responses as part of the building of friendship with place.

The teaching processes employed

Teaching guided by a nature as a friend model also has implications for how programs are conducted. The way teachers and leaders structure and conduct outdoor experiences is infinitely varied and itself the subject of full University courses. Like the choice of content, the choice of teaching processes is also an ethical issue. As examples: the initial introduction, the choice of equipment, sequencing of activity, construction of differing contexts - all have profound influence on student learning outcomes. Space is limited here to a few brief examples of the ways in which teaching processes can be guided by the nature as a friend metaphor.

Introductions to the outdoors need to parallel what we have learned through the experience of our own human friendships. Friendships build slowly, over time, without fear and discordant responses. For critical outdoor education this implies careful introduction, where getting to know the place takes priority over getting the campsite established, the equipment handed out or the “real” activity program underway. Often when I take students to climbing sites, I first encourage them to explore the area, to get a feel for the place and its personality. Students can also begin to relax, get to know this newness at their own pace, not that dictated by their imminent turn down the first abseil, their mounting fear and the instructor’s initial focus on how dangerous the cliff may be. The initial slow introduction also helps students place their later experience in a broader geographical context. Adventure activities demand attention, especially for novices. A slow introduction to the area (and deliberate time out during an activity) enables students to look around and begin to acclimatise to the broader environment in which they are immersed.

Equipment has a massive impact on what students learn about the outdoors. As an example, my own introduction to crosscountry skiing was on waxed skis. The equipment demanded that I understood and observed snow conditions, likely changes in

snow with terrain and aspect, future weather changes and past snowfall. Waxes provided a means by which I could comprehend the subtlety of snow metamorphosis. When students use patterned base skis they lose far more than the frustration and inconvenience of applying the wrong wax. The 'progress' of waxless skis is an interesting example of the way in which technology has distanced the outdoor recreator from a need to understand nature. Other examples in outdoor recreation are easy to find: in climbing, camming devices are more easily placed, but demand less skill and understanding of rock formation than do chocks or nuts. The Global Positioning System (GPS) promises you will never be lost in the bush again. Plastic whitewater craft don't demand the same level of river reading skills to successfully complete a whitewater trip compared to their fibreglass predecessors. Modern tentage allows the weary traveller to camp virtually anywhere, mindless of aspect, weather and topography. The detailed knowledge and skills concerning what wood will burn and to what temperature has been all but eclipsed by the lightweight stove and a sometimes superficial interpretation of minimum impact.

Experimenting with the type and extent of equipment can enable students to begin to understand how technology has profoundly influenced human nature relationships. A watch, a water bottle, a frisbee or a football, all bring with them particular ways of behaving, specific language, expectations and assumptions about humans and the environment. Critical outdoor education is attuned to making those expectations and assumptions more accessible for reflective discussion and informed action.

Sequencing activities also impacts on the relationship students can develop with nature. As an example: the skills and feelings of competence and ease that students gain in the environment in one activity are frequently not transferred to the next. To be at ease in a canoe doesn't seem to help student's fear of heights! To develop deeper personal relationships with environments takes time and familiarity, so I prefer students to engage with nature, at least initially, in one activity area. A gamut of necessarily shallow encounters which I think inevitably result from briefly introducing students to a range of activities and/or environments, also helps reinforce exploitive human nature relationships - relationships where students see the outdoors as a grand gymnasium or circus ground.

I consider it important for students to be able to repeat activities and experiences. A repeat experience help students internalise learning, but it also allows them the freedom to relax their focus from the activity itself to the environment in which they are operating. Re-climbing the same climb, re-paddling the same stretch of water, re-walking the same route build familiarity and confidence in the student's relationship and knowledge of place.

Contexts for learning in the outdoors can be altered enormously when compared to those imposed by the constraints of more conventional schooling. Living outdoors gives students the opportunity to begin to know the environment more intimately, to share with the bush a range of memorable experiences. Students need to be encouraged to meet the bush in as many different circumstances as possible. From each encounter a little more is learned.

Each differing circumstance will naturally lend itself to different learning outcomes. Sleeping on a ledge or at the base of the cliff, feeling the heat radiate out of the rock and gazing at the stars never fails to stimulate metaphysical thoughts and discussions. A small group sharing the intensity of a multipitch climb, sitting side by side, staring out on the vastness of the surrounding country, thinks and learns differently compared to the group top roping, en masse, climbs near the campsite.

Critical outdoor education is mindful of the way in which the teaching learning context carries assumptions about what is to be learned and valued. For example: on a bushwalk, a mechanical time frame with predetermined campsites and daily walk schedules potentially signals human dominance over natural cycles and mastery of terrain. A different set of learning would inevitably result from a walk which was conducted more in tune with natural rhythms, interesting diversions, reading and responding to the land and weather, rather than to the map and route plan. Establishing a campsite and sleeping in tents is often unnecessary; tents may signify a need for protection from the imagined evils of the bush at night and also serve to isolate students from the full cycles of the day and the learning that promotes.

In rockclimbing, the use of a ground belay system for top roped climbing increases safety and is more easily supervised, but is less suited to environmental outcomes and conveys impressions of climbing in a gymnasium. A ground belayed top rope increases physical impact when students gather at the base of the cliff; the dynamic is that of a larger group (usually more competitive, less personal, louder, more frivolous, less reflective); and the focus is primarily on technical climbing because all students face the cliff and have a somewhat restricted field of vision. The satisfaction of completing the climb and sitting next to the belayer, which comes from belaying on top of the cliff, is absent. Instead, the ground belay demands that the climber is immediately lowered back into the cluster of people he or she just left; there is no journey, physical or symbolic.

A context driven by the nature as a friend metaphor would not see the lizards, bird life or animal tracks noticed during the safety briefing as an interruption or distraction. Rather, human nature interaction is the very reason for the student's presence in the bush, the activity itself is secondary.

The venues identified as appropriate

Venues appropriate for critical outdoor education are not necessarily the same as those sought by outdoor recreation. The aim of getting to know nature as a friend dictates that places are specific, individual and personal. There are no generic 'cliffs' as there are no generic 'people'. Each cliff is different, with its own characteristics, idiosyncrasies, moods, and tolerances. Mt Arapiles seems to tolerate more climbers, Bundaleer is brooding and solemn. One of the questions that becomes essential to ask in critical outdoor education is, "why go to this place?", or as a reminder, "how central to the program is this specific place?"

Specific relationships with place create the realisation that is not possible to know and care for all places, all environments. Limiting the scale or extent to which caring occurs

is also a point pursued by Noddings, who when speaking of human human relationships, contends that it is not possible to truly care, for example, for all the starving children of the world (1984, p. 86). To do so would necessitate abandoning the caring already undertaken; a matter of limited resources and capacities.

[It is] painful to acknowledge that an ethic of caring limits our obligation to those so far removed from us that completion is impossible ... but this seems intuitively right (Noddings 1984, p. 153).

For environments this too makes sense. I have little affinity for the ocean. I grew up far from the sea and, while I have fond memories of playing in the waves on holiday, I do not have a sense of relatedness to the ocean. I care and act on environmental issues at Mt Arapiles because I do have a relatedness to that environment built up over time.

One of the dangers of adventure based outdoor education is that it potentially teaches students to appreciate only places which afford positive adventure outcomes. Critical outdoor education needs to be aware of this risk. For critical outdoor education, language which describes cliffs as worthless, rivers as boring or bush as monotonous and uninviting, needs to be interpreted and understood in terms of the human nature assumptions that it carries. Critical outdoor education would also seek to encourage students through revisits and attention to place characteristics and “personality” to develop relationships with more common land. Bioregional concepts, such as local watershed or food sources, have as much influence upon the choices a critical outdoor educator makes about a venue as might the recreational opportunity the venue affords.

The learning outcomes emphasised

If developing an understanding of human nature relationships is the primary goal, then the activity needs to be conceptualised as such. This understanding then takes precedence over all other aspects; it must pervade the entire program, from activity and equipment choices through to the place you select to sit and each lunch. Outdoor education happens 24 hours a day and free from the imposed contexts and agendas of conventional schooling. Letting the learning goals influence total choices is both challenging and enjoyable. Orford describes the need for pervasiveness in this way:

Making the most of learning opportunities can be done by understanding that *everything* during the outdoor education experience is program. This includes pre-planning, the bus trip, arrival, setting up, outdoor activities, community living (meals, free time, bed time, cooking, dishes...) evening programs, packing up, the trip home, and follow up afterwards. Whatever time is available should contribute to the purpose... . (Orford 1993. p. 31 original emphasis)

LaChapelle describes a similar focussing of learning experiences when describing her program called “Breaking Through”. LaChapelle relates the importance of a total mindset which has students recognising that “nature affords experiences” rather than people enacting them. (1991 p.20) In this sense students are encouraged to see their

actions in the environment as a result of nature co-operating with them, rather than being an inert playing field for their desires.

Concluding thoughts

A primary rationale behind advocating approaching nature as a friend and the development of critical outdoor education which focuses on understanding human nature relationships, is to promote ethical action towards the natural environment both in the outdoors and in everyday living. Caring for nature is a primary goal of the nature as a friend model. For this caring to be sustained students need to perceive an improved relationship, a reciprocation or response with nature and place (see Noddings 1984) If students perceive their efforts at getting to know nature are fruitless then their efforts will diminish. Fortunately this is rarely a practical problem. The enthusiasm with which students open up and perceive responsiveness and positive growth from personal human nature relationships is always a pleasure to watch and share. It is my greatest satisfaction as a teacher.

Improving human nature relationship through personal outdoor experiences is not only possible, it's profoundly rewarding.

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