

# New Perspectives of Self, Nature and Others

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## **Abstract summary**

This essay discusses how a person could change the way in which they understand and interpret nature, and the way in which outdoor experiences influence beliefs and attitudes. Writing from a personal perspective, I consider the metaphorical images of nature which I developed during my life. Images of cliffs as playgrounds or gymnasiums, images of National parks as museums or cathedrals and images of nature as a friend or relative are discussed. My conclusions are that personal outdoor experiences can enable someone to develop a clearer understanding of their relatedness to nature which can influence their everyday living practices and preferences.

## **Introduction**

As a child I can recall driving with my parents up a narrow winding mountain road. I was terrified. I was so scared of falling over the edge that I couldn't look out the window. My fear of high exposed places, my perceptions of what was dangerous, were shaped by my experiences and my social surroundings. I had been taught that cliffs were dangerous places, fraught with hazards such as falling rock, crumbling edges and even wind gusts that could mercilessly push me over the edge. Thirty years later, climbing rocks is central to both my work and leisure. Through climbing I have been able to gain a different perspective on cliff environments. Climbing has also enabled me to see myself differently, to see others in a different way and to look more clearly at the society and culture in which I live. These new perspectives and the set of relationships they enable are the basis for this essay; they are also the main motivating force in my climbing. Often, other with whom I climb, demonstrate that they too have gained a different view. I have included some of their writing here to help illustrate what I mean.

Rockclimbing doesn't just involve the act of scaling a cliff. I think of climbing as everything which combines to create the context or atmosphere of climbing. For example, the camping, the group of people I am with, the weather, the rock itself and the cliff's relationship to the surrounding land, as well as the type of technical climbing involved. These and other factors combine to provide the overall experience of climbing. It is this total experience of climbing that helps me gain different perspectives of myself as well as the natural and cultural worlds.

## **Initial Impressions, Motives and Influences**

My initial motivations for climbing centred around the meeting of challenges and the experience of adventure. I was scared by the height and climbing gave me a buzz. Cliffs such as those at Mt. Arapiles seemed like enormous gymnasiums covered with a multitude of climbing problems to be solved. Here each climb is given a numerical grade; the higher the grade the more difficult the climb. I was into the numbers. I can remember arriving home after a weekend's climbing to describe my experiences solely in terms of the grade of the routes I'd done. "I did two 18s and a long 15" would be a typical reply to an inquiry. Competition was hot and underscored most of the campfire conversation. Who was doing what climb and how hard it was seemed all important. My bedroom walls were covered in pictures cut from climbing magazines; I lived for the rush of adrenalin and the subconscious bravado that went with climbing. I can recall thinking I'd give up climbing once I could lead Kama Sutra, a difficult route at Mount Arapiles. Perhaps I thought that leading a difficult climb was like winning the grandfinal and there was nothing left after that. In retrospect, the kudos of climbing may well have been more important than the climbing itself. I find it interesting to recall that I saw cliffs in much the same way as a sports person would see a tennis court or running track. Cliffs, while pleasant to be around, were playing fields, they were the arenas in which I sought recreation and recognition.

The image I had of myself was of a climber, and with this went the attitudes and values of the climbing subculture. The thing about being so caught up in a (sub)culture was that I couldn't see that practices and values were often adopted unthinkingly. Although climbers often considered themselves to be somewhat radical and enjoyed being seen as "the fools on the hill", they had their own constraining set of beliefs and behaviours which frequently became just as restrictive and conforming as those they had rejected. As an example, in the mid 70s good climbers wore white pants. I think it was because they stood out more clearly in photographs, especially the black and whites which dominated climbing publications of that era. The fact that white was a ridiculous colour choice for an activity that involved scrambling up rocks, and that the pants often restricted movement was immaterial.

The climbing subculture helped shape my self image and also the image I had of cliffs. Getting up climbs was all important, but certain rules existed. Pulling up on the rope for example, was cheating. In the mid 70's Australian climbers were exposed to the use of magnesium carbonate (chalk) to prevent sweaty hands from slipping off holds. It's not surprising to remember that chalk was already in use in gymnasiums and weight rooms for similar purposes. With the advent of chalk, cliffs moved closer to resembling gymnasiums. White blotches covered the natural cliff colours, marking the holds for future climbers.. Dress altered too. As the high fashions hit the aerobics gyms in the 80's so too did it influence climbers. Lycra tights improved the climbers flexibility and also looked good in the now colour pics.

Over recent years climbing gymnasiums have appeared throughout Victoria. Climbing has now become the new way of staying fit and exercising with enjoyment. Fibreglass and plastic holds enable gym managers to create infinite variety and novelty on the artificial "cliffs". The transfer to natural cliffs is interesting. That climbing on a natural cliff is "just like in a gym except outdoors" is a comment I have heard repeatedly. One of the implications of this is that climbers, usually those fairly new to the activity, have increasingly used power drills to bore holes into natural cliffs for placement of steel anchors. The steel bolt anchors make the climbs much safer and enable climbers to concentrate almost exclusively on technical climbing difficulty, as they do on indoor artificial walls. Technical standards have increased enormously, accidents have decreased per head of climbing population, more people have been attracted by the increased safety margins; and the once wild and scary cliffs now seem much tamer. Today cliffs are increasingly regarded and treated as gymnasiums by most beginning climbers; but for me the view has changed.

### **Changing perspectives of self**

*Sitting up underneath the roof belaying Simon up I felt so elated. I had achieved something that I thought I could do. I had believed in myself. If I can do this on the rock face then surely I can do it at home. To believe and trust in myself ... To stand up for the values that I believe in. To feel strong and clear headed ...* Kasonde.

Despite increases in safety, climbing is still seen by most in our society as frivolous, stupid behaviour, especially when the top can be gained with less effort and with more safety by an alternate route. In our culture we hold human life to be of utmost importance. We devote enormous amounts of time and resources to prolonging life against illness, increasing safety standards in industry, on the roads, in leisure and recreation activities. While today's climbing equipment is vastly superior and safer than even 10 years ago, the activity itself conflicts with our cultural view of the importance of life. For example, climbers often choose to climb without ropes, to "solo" a route, reliant only on a pair of boots and their climbing judgement and skill. By deliberately confronting society's attitudes with respect to life and safety, climbers can gain a perspective which is different from that of the rest of society.

At the end of a climb, when I am sitting, taking in the rope as my partner climbs, my heart pumping, and adrenalin still flowing, I find it almost impossible not to reflect on the personal significance of living. Often when climbing, fear is irrepresible. I have seen people weep, scream with frustration, sing, laugh and plead to their God. At such times the inner person is very transparent to anyone watching. In climbing I must confront my own strengths and weaknesses, and must own up to my own motives and fears. Why I bother to climb needs to be answered, at least for me. Climbing creates a context in which I need to learn to know myself, how I relate to others and to the natural world in which I climb.

*One of the most significant moments was when a group of us were lying out in our sleeping bags under the stars... there was a feeling of intimacy between friends rarely found... the result of the serenity of the place, the lack of distractions and the ever inspiring view of the stars. (James)*

Climbing most frequently involves another person. I have developed very strong bonds with my climbing companions. It is unusual to entrust our wellbeing to others, yet in climbing this happens quite often; especially when leading a climb at the limit of your ability, when a fall is almost expected. Friendships formed through such trust and shared experiences aren't influenced by social status, nationality, gender, or other preference. Friendships develop because each partner is willing to give and support, not blindly but with judgement. My friendships formed on cliffs have endured, they have also helped me understand what is important in people and how I have been influenced by cultural prejudices.

Given the power of climbing to force more honest appraisal, it is not surprising that my attitude to climbing and cliffs changed. The more I climbed the less arrogant and more humble I had to become.

### **Changing perspectives of nature**

*We had two days left, I'm surprised and feel sad, we walk and talk. Thoughts of home and things to be done start to seep into my mind. It's a bright sunny day, I want it to stay that way. I want to stay here where I feel in touch with the bush, where deep down I feel that maybe I understand this place, here where words don't express the knowing.*

*James*

*The feeling you get from just being on a rockface with one or two others is terribly different to being surrounded by hoards of people. You have the piece of mind to feel at one with nature when it is quiet and nothing else is (a) pulling focus*

*Tessa*

Cliffs were like vast gymnasiums or so I thought. When describing my earliest climbing I often talked about "conquering" climbs, "defeating" difficult moves, "doing it", "beating it". I had entered with an attitude that natural environments existed for my use, in this case to climb on, for fun. Such an attitude may be excusable in the light of our historical relationship with the natural environment.

Much of our society's relationship with nature is similar to my initial climbing experiences. We look at nature as existing only for the benefit of humans, whether for recreation, fossil fuel, food, or as a source of minerals or timber. Western culture has a long tradition of treating humans as separate from, and above nature. For example Judaism and Christianity proffered a view of humans as masters rather than members of the natural world. The Bible in Genesis commands that humans be "fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth". Until the late 1960s this passage of the Bible has seemed justification for the exploitation of nature. However, more recently this passage has been reinterpreted to mean that Christians are responsible for the wellbeing of all creatures on the earth and in the Kingdom of God. Revelation is ongoing and often slow, however this stewardship, or caring role, still places humans above nature.

Even more contemporary arguments that the complex natural ecosystem must be preserved, are often based on what might happen to humans if it is not. As an example, the concern for the global loss of trees, especially rainforests, is linked with changing atmospheric conditions which will alter the planets habitability for humans, rather than a concern for the rainforest ecosystem itself. Our culture does not have a concept of nature as important for its own sake or that sees us as a part of the natural world.

*Rock stays,  
earth stays,  
I die and put my bones in cave or earth.  
Soon my bones become earth ...  
all the same.  
My spirit has gone back to my country ...  
my mother.*

*Bill Neidjie (1986) **Kadadu Man***

As part of climbing I would often camp near or visit cliffs that had been significant to Koorie people. The Koorie relationship with nature was of stark contrast to my own Judao-Christian foundation. Rather than separate from the land, Koorie people understood that the land was part of themselves; their life was inextricably woven with nature. They had strong animist beliefs (that all beings and objects have a soul) and so treated all of nature: animals, plants, rocks, water, with the respect that we reserve for human life. It is interesting to reflect upon the impact on the environment that the demise of these animist beliefs could have precipitated. Dominant Western culture may be beginning to confer some intrinsic rights to animals and other living things such as trees, but conferring of rights to "non-subjects", such as rocks, is beyond comprehension of most.

*I found myself experiencing a heightened sense of awareness and I noticed so many more things while I was climbing the next day. The feel and texture of the rock became more apparent, the smells and sounds were more vivid.*

*Victor*

Koorie perspectives of the land developed from living with the land over thousands of years. Koorie knowledge is not what Western culture would regard as "scientific", "rational" nor necessarily worthwhile. As my climbing experiences grew so did my knowledge of the land, of cliff environments; yet it was knowledge that was also nontraditional. The knowledge I developed from climbing was very different from the geology I studied at University. I learnt what rock felt like, how different rocks weathered or cracked, what type of features predominated: cracks, incut holds, vertical flutings or overlaps. I could describe a cliff in terms of the style of climbing it afforded, what the friction was like for my feet, what sort of equipment I would need to protect a climb. At the end of a day climbing I could visualise and describe in

detail minute aspects of the rock which I had climbed. The life that was part of a cliff environment also become familiar: lizards, spiders, birds, the multitude of plant life that survived way above the earth on tiny ledges or in weathered pickets of rock. I learnt to read the rock- what was solid, which coloured rock was likely to break off, where cracks would lead and what to expect above me. I would notice the pebbles imbedded in the Arapiles cliffs, the large crystals in the Buffalo granite, the weathering of the Bungonia limestone, the absence of cracks in the Hanging Rock trachyte. I began to develop a strong personal understanding of rock type and the world of cliffs; not as a scientist, but as a climber.

Climbing and camping at cliffs also taught me about shadows, light and darkness. A day in a cool chimney climb ensured I was more aware of the sun next time I chose a route. On hot days I watched the shadows advance across the wall in a way I had never bothered to notice before. Climbing demands that I know these things. Climbing changed forever the way I understood and related to cliff environments.

### **Developing a relationship with nature**

Ever increasing numbers of Australians live in cities. The once close affinity that many Australians had with the bush has disappeared, to be preserved only as a myth; a myth which is exploited by the market place in the sale of driz-a-bone jackets, akubra hats, 4WD vehicles, outdoor footwear and other icons of the Australian bush image. However, through climbing (and other outdoor activities) it is possible to renew a genuine acquaintance with the earth.

*A full moon lit the cliff at night... great sights of the shadows in the gullies and the rock reflecting a cool glow against the dark blue sky. I had never seen Arapiles in this light before.... It was great to experience another image... like getting to know another facet of a friend.*

*Victor.*

*I slept in my clothes in the open... I felt a greater connectedness to the life cycle of the planet. ...I wasn't always comfortable and wasn't always warm, but it was a remarkably positive bonding that I experience on these nights.*

*Chris*

I now like to think of rocky places as close friends. I think I get to know a natural place in a way similar to how I get to know a person: by spending time with them, sharing experiences, seeing them in differing moods, early in the morning and late at night, in the company of others and by myself, in Spring, Winter, Summer and Autumn, by sharing my ideas and listening, being open to what they say to me. All of this is true of rocky places also. For example, sleeping out: in caves, on rock terraces, on ledges or in the grass at the base of the cliff, helps me know a place, assimilate its moods and learn more about that half of the day that our culture has quite effectively eliminated with artificial lighting. I keep returning to the same cliffs, to explore more of the hidden gullies and airy faces. I have climbed in all weathers, different seasons, day, night, morning and evening. With cliffs I have shared both elation and sadness. Most importantly I have learned how to observe and listen to what cliffs can teach me.

As a result of personal experiences it has been possible to establish a sense of kinship with cliff environments so that my presence there does not feel alien. The gymnasium of my early climbing has disappeared; it has been replaced by a sense that I am more a part of these rocky places. With this growing sense of identity or relatedness with nature comes a desire to look more critically at the culture we have created and to care more for the environment of which I am a part.

### **Changing perspectives of a culture**

Australian rocks are ageless. I find it impossible to even begin to comprehend the length of time places like Gariwerd (the Grampians) or Mt. Arapiles have existed. Europeans first visited these two places in 1836; less than 200 years ago! Koories inhabited these sites for many thousands of years before that. Yet even this time span is insignificant compared to the millions of years over which the present land form was shaped.

When I first visited places like Gariwerd, the impression was of endless natural bush and craggy skylines. However, from the top of a climb the view changes; I have begun to realise that the bush is a small island in a sea of farm land. In less than 200 years we have cleared and cultivated vast quantities of bush for mining and agriculture. In 1924, when Hume and Hovell crossed the Murray river into what is now Victoria, most of the State was forested land. Today 36% remains and none of it is free of roads and tracks.

As one response to environmental loss, our society has moved to preserve some areas of land as National, State or Forest Parks, which afford differing degrees of protection. Such parks are similar to museums. Like museums they are preserving aspects of our natural and cultural heritage. Like museums tourists can pay to go and see what life was like... before we built cities and covered the earth with concrete and chopped down the trees and the birds and animals all died or moved away. By climbing in such parks I can develop a personal perspective of these areas. While I recognise that these museums are necessary, I also recognise that the society in which I live values these museums as "things worth having", rather than seeing them as reminders of what we have destroyed by our everyday living.

An alternative interpretation of Parks and natural spaces as museums, is to consider them a source of inspiration and recreation, a place of worship. In Parks our culture has established special places to enable people to get back in touch with natural roots, to rejoice the natural, find space for communion with nature, or a place to marvel and admire the creations of nature. (Evidence for this may lie in the tendency for National Parks to be formed around natural wonders or spectacular scenery rather than more common land.)

While thinking of nature as a museum or store house of beauty and naturalness, or as a cathedral, is more environmentally friendly or sympathetic than my beginning view of nature as a playground, it still places humans as the centre of the world, and does little to challenge our cultural view of nature as an object for human pleasure and service. The view of nature as a museum or cathedral also does little to help me understand the relationship I have with nature in my everyday living and my relatedness with "common land".

I would never have considered that climbing could prompt me to consider other social practices such as agriculture, but it does. Sitting high above the Wimmera plains watching the districts topsoil head southwards with the aid of a strong northerly, is just one example. My perch above the campsite prompts other reflections. The network of foot tracks and sprawling campsites indicate our collective laziness and how nature suffers. Why walk when you can drive; why go round when you can go straight through? Our culture is forever searching for easier alternatives, technical solutions; the cost is invariably environmental exploitation and personal alienation from nature.

Rockclimbing can also make me more aware of my own living needs. I know how much food I require for a few days away, how much water is needed for cooking and drink. One of the issues I can easily examine from a climbing perspective is that of materialism. Climbing can be an avenue to spend vast sums of money on every increasing technical gadgetry. Alternatively, more basic gear and a style of trip which lets me camp in the bush near a cliff, can enable much to be learned about the false needs I have developed in my everyday living. By removing myself from my everyday circumstances and taking with me only what is essential for my time away I am in an excellent position to examine the culture left behind in a more critical and enlightened way. Flash cars, up to the fashion clothing, the latest CDs, television and other technical gismos are ridiculously out of place when the context is altered.

Climbing has taught me how I can develop a relatedness to nature as a close friend and ultimately part of myself. It is possible now to get to know "common land". I now look for the "personality" of the place in which I live and have begun to ask some questions which help me understand that relationship.

What is the landform that lies under the concrete and bitumen? Where does the water go when it rains? Where do the wastes go? What food is produced in my region? What food do I consume which is grown elsewhere, even in another country? Can I identify my impact, or am I deferring my impact to somewhere else? Where does the energy I use come from? Do I know the cycles of nature in my region: the seasons, rainfall, the moon, sun, growth and decay? How much natural bush remains? Where is it? What lives there? How is my city sited on the landform and why? Why?

### **Conclusions**

My approach to the natural environment has altered significantly since I first started climbing. Part of this has been due to the growing concern that environmental questions now receive in all facets of my life. Environmental issues are common in the media, and environmental interest groups such as the Wilderness Society, Greenpeace and the more radical Earth First!, have helped me understand the global pressures on the environment. However, by themselves environmental problems on the other side of the world don't force me to change the way I live. While I care about the amazon rainforests I don't really know much about them. What I do know about is the cliffs and areas where I climb. I care about these places and feel personally related to them. At Arapiles I have acted to prevent erosion, to minimise trampling, restore vegetation cover, remove rubbish and introduced weeds, and control abuses such as bolting. Because I have learned and felt my relatedness to nature I have started asking questions and ultimately changed the way I live; what clothes I buy, energy I use and products I consume. I have developed a concern for nature as ultimately part of myself. For me, climbing has provided the avenue to develop a personal relationship with nature. I'm certain that other ways of developing a relatedness to the natural environment exist and can have similar benefits. The key to it all seems to be the fostering of new perspectives of yourself, others, and the natural environment so that you can look more critically at our present culture and your own life.

Nature as an  
object



Nature as a  
subject

**CHANGING PERSPECTIVES OF NATURE**

Natural environments as  
playgrounds or gymnasiums

National Parks as museums  
or storehouses of beauty and  
naturalness

National Parks as cathedrals  
or places of worship

Nature as a close friend or  
next of kin

Nature as a part of self

Adapted from: Gough, N. (1990) *Imagining Our Relationships with Nature. Connections: A Conference for the Environment, the Outdoor and Camping.* Bendigo: Unpublished paper.