Re-telling the Snowy River: Exploring connections between river guides, the experience of place, and outdoor education.

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research study into the lived experience of river guides working as educators on the Snowy River in southeastern Australia (Mullins, 2007). Outdoor education programs often hire leaders who are also credentialed guides for a range of reasons: to manage safe passage of the group downriver, to provide technical training, and to meet the educational objectives of the organization that the program participants are drawn from. The river guide-as-educator is often provided with little advice or assistance about how to navigate through this set of contradictory demands. This research reports on evidence drawn from a series of phenomenologically based interviews (Seidman, 1998) with three guides. Each of the guides had a long history of working with educational groups on the Snowy River. The study reveals how they balanced their own sense of attachment to the Snowy with the needs and desires of the program participants and their host organizations. It was found that the guides had a sense of belonging and care for the Snowy River accrued through a layering of many experiences over an extended period of time. As a result they sometimes guided in ways that responded to the particularities of place, thus questioning their own adventure and service practices. The tension between these two findings provides an empirical basis for understanding the possibilities of, and limitations to, a place-responsive pedagogy (Cameron, 2003; Wattchow, 2005) for the Snowy River.

The Snowy River – A Locality Map
The Snowy River
A River Guide’s Section of the Snowy River
Introduction

In recent years outdoor education in Australia has become increasingly concerned with the ‘environment’ and this has become a major component of most programs (Martin, 1999; Wattchow, 2005). However, global definitions of outdoor education that call for an education ‘in, about and for’ the ‘environment’ can be problematic. Brookes (2004) for example, is critical of ‘monolithic’ and universal views of ‘nature’ and ‘environment’, frequently espoused by outdoor educators. Potentially one of the most important developments in outdoor education discourse in recent times has been an understanding of ‘place’. Places are created through lived-experience and Relph (1976, p. 6) suggests they become “sources of security and identity”. For Relph (1976, p. 37) “the word ‘place’ is best applied to those fragments of human environments where meanings, activities and a specific landscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other.”

Wattchow (2005, p. 25) suggests that outdoor education practice should proceed under a ‘place paradigm’. This represents a distinctive re-orientation away from an abstract and generalised concept of ‘environment’ or ‘nature’, towards the experience of specific landscapes. Environmental outdoor education has become increasingly concerned with ‘place’ theory. This theory has been broached, in a variety of ways and depths, by a number of writers and researchers (see for example Birrell, 2005; Blades, 2005; Brookes, 2002; Cuthbertson, 1999; Cuthbertson, Heine & Whitson, 1997; Preston & Griffiths, 2004; Stewart, 1998, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b; Wattchow, 2001, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008).

However, this recent interest by outdoor education writers in place could be argued to be largely rhetorical, and therefore in danger of becoming another case of the gap between theory and practice (Payne, 2002, 2005). Outdoor education may be caught in ingrained and established practices from the past, and the environmental appropriateness of the ‘staple diet of activities’ like kayaking and rafting may not have been properly questioned (Payne, 2005). Hence the significance of the asking how, and in what ways does the current practice of river guides-as-educators tend to respond to place and how, and in what ways, does it tend to work against place?

There is little previous empirical research available to inform such a question, or the more general discussion of place responsive pedagogy. Recommendations for a place responsive pedagogy for river guiding, or indeed for any other mode of outdoor travel, are scarce, even though river travel is a commonly practiced form of outdoor education in Australia. In order to find out to what extent the practices of river guides-as-educators practice a place-responsive pedagogy it is necessary to have well researched examples of how outdoor education leaders may work as ‘guides to place’.

An overview of the study: Methodological considerations.

This study sets out to address a number of gaps in the research literature in terms of understandings that may inform a place-responsive pedagogy. It explored the stories told by three experienced guides-as-educators on the Snowy River and considered the nature of personal connections they developed for the Snowy, and how that ‘sense of place’ influenced their guiding practices. The inquiry leant itself to an interpretive research framework. A heuristic methodology was developed to allow scope for the research questions to emerge from the researcher’s own involvement, as an outdoor educator and long term river guide on the Snowy. If outdoor educators are to more fully comprehend the potential of a place responsive pedagogy then questions must be asked about aspects of experience that are often taken for granted, such as the role of outdoor activities in particular landscapes and the stories that leaders and guides tell about their experiences. The answers to such questions may inform a ‘place-responsive pedagogy’.
This research sought a framework that would have a responsiveness to place embedded within its methodology. Searching for just such an ‘ecological’ approach to research that is sensitive to ‘topos’ has been a motivating concern for Pivnick (2003) who says,

> I began to wonder if there was something in the way in which we come to know a “place” which has a commonality whether it involves a naturalist’s relationship with the land or a researchers relationship with a topic. Is there a way in which naturalists come to know the land, which could in fact form a framework for more broad forms of research? (p. 147)

Pivnick (2003) concludes that four steps are appropriate for place-oriented research.

- **Opening and listening**: which entails sitting still, thoughtful observation, as well as careful and patient ‘listening’ (the sort of attentiveness to surroundings that some nature writers have modeled).
- **Reading the signs**: Reading appropriate signs takes knowledge, experience and commitment (as suggested by Relph’s (1992) empathetic insider).
- **Fact-finding**: once immersion in the ‘territory’ has occurred, the emphasis changes to a more active knowledge gaining, with a more purposeful approach where interests are defined and guided by specific questions. And once this has been done a ‘re-entry’ in to the territory can occur with a purpose in mind.
- **Caring about and for place**: The kind of care, sensitive to upholding the integrity of the place, a sense of conscience. An ecological researcher ‘needs to be sensitive to motivation, to ensure that actions are being taken on behalf of the best interest of the topic’.

Relationships, collaboration and reciprocity may serve as good rubric for the approach that should to be taken in this kind of research. This study was in and about place, and was unashamedly local in its focus, looking at the particular before the general. The methodological approach aimed to reveal how the participants in this study formed their complex subjective relationships with the Snowy. The attempt to do this relied upon an in-depth interview process (phenomenological interviewing, described below) that offered a particularly good opportunity to study these human-place subjectivities in detail.

The number of participants sought was intentionally small (three river guides plus the researcher) due to both the scope and aims of the study and to balance the length of time required to complete the series of three, in-depth interviews with each participant. An intensive interview schedule was employed, which aimed to collect in-depth accounts of personal experience with ‘thick’ description. These aims were commensurate with a heuristic methodology, which places concern not with attempting a ‘random’ or ‘representative’ sample. Instead an ‘intensity sampling’ (Patton, 2002) was employed to include participants who both worked as outdoor educators and had a long term work history (more than ten years) with the Snowy, in order to develop a deep insights into the phenomena. A passionate attachment to the Snowy River was expressed in a myriad of ways by the three river guides in the study (Julien, Chris and Bronwyn). It is important to demonstrate how the participants’ attachment to the Snowy forms a vital part of their identity. Julien expresses that the Snowy is a special place for him when he says,

> I always feel lucky to go down there ‘cause it’s a great place to work it’s a great place to be.

Whilst Chris describes feeling ‘at home’ and ‘belonging’ on the river.

> I guess the fact that I was always, felt like I pretty much belonged on the river…so in terms of actually guiding on the Snowy later on, I just felt totally, totally at home.

A passion for the Snowy River is apparent in the participants’ stories told about their intention to return to the river in the future. Maintaining an ongoing connection is considered vital and this personal connection extends beyond the ‘working life’ of the guides-as-educators. The third guide, Bronwyn, said,
I’d love to go down the Snowy every year until I couldn’t walk again… I just want to be able to keep my connection… if I can keep the personal connection that, that’s really important.

The passion for place is also expressed in an ongoing curiosity to learn about the place. Julien describes his own curiosity to pay attention to details of the river, to notice changes over time, and imagine the future of the place.

I’m always aware of the river, what it’s doing… always checking out the weather and being aware… The last trip for example, I spent most of the time trying to work out… when all the rain that fell on Monday would actually hit us… because it has, it has kind of a double peak the river, so it rises once then drops again, so you’re always monitoring the river and trying to work out what it’s [doing]… I’m also looking around and learning about where the river’s at… checking out as many campsites as I can… checking out rapids to see how they’ve changed. I guess just being really nosy about the river and trying to learn… just being really inquisitive… to go “ah that’s interesting”, I wonder what that’ll be like in a couple of years?

Beyond ‘listening’, paying attention, there is an important desire to ‘fit in’ with the place, to respond in terms of adapting behaviour. For Chris, responding to the river environment is part of the ‘very soul’ of a river journey.

The idea of getting out in an environment that has no really other access except by the flowing river and having the river almost let you come down and having to follow its path, having to… live by its terms… there’s almost like a blending of yourself with the river… you make sure you’re taking the path of least resistance, which the river does, and which you should do as well if you want to get down easily… If you want to see animals, if you want to see good sunsets or whatever you’ve just got to understand the river a little bit… you plan things according to what parameters you’ve got, but you very much plan them according to what the river can allow you to do… that’s more sort of the soul of the trip for me… going with the flow of the river.

The interviewing approach employed in this study was based on what Seidman (1998) refers to as in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study. The most distinguishing feature of this in-depth approach to interviewing is the structuring of a series of three separate interviews with each participant (Seidman, 1998).

- **Interview One: ‘Focused life history’** – The interviewer aims to put the participant’s (co-researchers) experience in context by asking her/him to talk about as much as possible about their personal life history as it pertains to the topic of interest.

- **Interview Two: ‘The details of experience’** – The purpose of the second interview is to focus on the details of the participant’s current experience in the topic area. Asking for opinions is avoided as seeking concrete details of their experience is sought.

- **Interview Three: ‘Reflection on meaning’** – In the third interview participants are asked to reflect on the meaning of their experience. ‘Meaning’ is intended to go well beyond satisfaction to address the intellectual and emotional connections between the participant and the topic. The third interview firmly relies on good foundations and insights being established in the first two interviews. Initial interpretation of the data collected in interviews one and two, guides the questioning / listening process in interview three.

The full interview transcripts were then taken on the river journey and read and re-read along the way by the researcher. Stories told by the participants were read in specific locations mentioned (or nearby campsites) in order that the places were highly ‘present’. The interview transcripts themselves became physically imprinted by the river as sand and insects made their way across the paper while sheltering under simple and open tarpaulins throughout the journey. Interpretation of the data continued and heuristic reflections were written in a
researcher journal on the river journey. It was from these sources of data, actions and places that the following themes and discussion of the river guides-as-educators were generated.

- **Theme One** - ‘It was a great adventure, every turn has something new’. Adventure is an ideal that has motivated the guide-educators (in the past or present) who subsequently act as adventure role models for others under their care or mentorship. As an ideal that may be imposed on place adventure is considered to be problematic for a place-responsive pedagogy.

- **Theme Two** - ‘Taking the experience where the client needs it’. The guide-educators express a culture of ‘service’, where the various pre-set agendas of client groups (including educational institutions) must be addressed.

- **Theme Three** – ‘I pretty much belonged on the river’. The guides express a comfort, connection and belonging on the Snowy River. The deep feelings for place also create a sense of care that might be called an ‘eco-politics of place’.

- **Theme Four** – ‘Going with the flow of the river’. The guides through their passion for revealing the ‘land’ (river environment) act as storytellers and encourage a ‘fitting in’ with the place, all of which contribute towards a place responsive pedagogy for the Snowy River.

Discussion of the study’s findings later in this paper primarily focuses on the first two of these themes as they respond mainly to how the guides’ sense of attachment to the river did, or did not influence how they worked on the river with clients. We have already drawn upon the third theme earlier in the paper when introducing the participants and their sense of connection to the Snowy. The final theme will be returned to in the conclusion section of the paper. But prior to a detailed discussion of these first two themes, it is necessary to consider a central problem faced by all outdoor educators and guides when considering how a sense of place may be attained in wild and remote places, like the Snowy River.

**The problem of travel and a sense of place.**

Throughout much of the literature on place, the notion of the home and a sense of rootedness are central. The preference for ‘place’ as ‘home’, especially amongst the phenomenologically inspired geographers (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974, 1975, 1977) can be traced to Heidegger’s notion of ‘dwelling’. In outdoor education, the journey is often a core part of the educational process. As such, it may appear incongruous with notions of place as home. But could there be another type of ‘dwelling’ in the world, one not so reliant upon a sense of being rooted to one place?

For many, travel and mobility are considered as one of the primary threats to a deep and meaningful experience of place. If the local or resident becomes the ‘existential insider’ (Relph, 1976), it is the traveler/visitor/tourist that is destined to remain as the ‘existential outsider’? There is some research, which also offers significant warnings about the way visitors encounter the land. In the Australian setting, research by Brookes (2001) has shown that even on an iconic wilderness journey (a commercial rafting trip on the Franklin River in Tasmania), participant tourists’ attentiveness to a specific geography (place) is minimal. Raffan’s (1992) research into place relations of indigenous people and Euro-Canadians in the Thelon Reserve is also telling. He concludes that outdoor experiences for many non-indigenous travelers, particularly of the self-contained type typical of much outdoor education, do not lead to a deepening sense of place. Raffan (1992) says that it is possible to visit with a guide or on one’s own,

> With a perspective narrowed to the river corridor exclusively and/or with sight shortened to map references only, and to return with no appreciable new insights or observations of what the land was like or what the land had to offer. (p. 382)
In addition to mobility a second problem associated with traveling emerges from the intentions and expectations carried by the traveler. Ryden (1993) is critical of the touristic imagination of the outsider, suggesting that the tourist frequently imposes imported aesthetic standards on to the land by which they then judge the local landscape. For the ‘tourist’ traveler, according to Raffan (1992), “the sense of place is one largely constructed away from the place, and probably long before a person ever sets foot on the ground” (p. 375).

Outdoor journeys and relatively short visits to the bush, or river, are typical of outdoor education programs. On the surface they appear to be a perfect example of the idea of the ‘outsider’ in the landscape, and initially it would be all too easy to dismiss the outdoor journey as an eminently unsuitable way to build place responsiveness. The question must be asked: Is a meaningful experience of place possible for those who travel in the outdoors? It is worth examining the small number of studies within outdoor education that have investigated the phenomena of outdoor education travel. While certain travel undoubtedly involves no more than a minimal sensitivity to place, it is likely that outdoor travel need not be bound or defined by a sense of ‘placelessness’.

While the professional discourse on landscape and place tends to celebrate rootedness and local identity, this may be a reaction to a very modern sense of alienation and placelessness resulting from too much travel and excessive mobility. According to anthropologist Clifford (cited in Potteiger & Purinton, p. 278) metaphors of ‘rootedness’, and strategies of fixing cultures to local places, reflect the particular desires of those cultures with the power to travel and transcend limits. The emphasis on ‘rootedness’ also ignores the importance of travel even for many traditional cultures, including, as the social ecologist Mulligan (2003) points out, those in Australia.

What we sometimes forget is that Aboriginal people traveled across considerable distances and communicated across even more vast distances. Their knowledge of places was certainly not confined to the local. (p. 277)

Relph’s (1976) notion of place relationships is built on the premise that time in place is central to the building of deep place relations. While time may be an important factor, many agree that it may not be the only significant factor. Lippard (1997, p. 27) supports Mulligan’s (2003) argument by saying that indigenous peoples often have a broader concept of home, one that is more an extension of their soul or spirit. There are other indications that place relations may be experienced in more complex ways. Lippard (1997) suggests that our connection to significant places may be multi-centered.

The relationship of multicenteredness to identity is less acknowledged than that of either rootedness or placelessness. We come to a sense of belonging in a place by any number of different roads; in fact, mere time spent is often not enough. Although tradition has it that the longer a family has occupied a place, the deeper the roots, psychological ties can be as strong as historical ones, and they can be formed by “rootless” individuals if their longing for roots is strong enough. To be of rather than in place certainly does not demand that one be born and raised there. (p. 42)

Outdoor educators such as Cuthbertson, Heine & Whitson (1997) consider both Relph’s (1976) insider/outside continuum, and the work of certain nature writers, to be limited in value and problematic. The resident/visitor duality does not give room for the deep attachments and belonging that are anecdotally demonstrated as possible in outdoor travel. Cuthbertson et al (1997) are similarly critical and dismissive of nature writers such as Henry Thoreau, Wendell Berry and Aldo Leopold, who they describe as the purveyors of ‘natural rootedness’. Nature writers have often explored natural environments through their lived experiences, and have articulated a wealth of knowledge about human and nature relationships, often as part of long-term relationships in local areas. Cuthbertson et al (1997) argue that because of the increasing difficulty in “acquiring a piece of the earth” due to
“social, economic and political constraints”, such notions of place deny the vast majority of current Western society the possibility of a deep connection to place (p. 73). They conclude that natural rootedness then is “at best a romantic notion, one that currently has its place more in the affective domain than in the domain of probabilities to be realized” (p. 73). They propose that a sense of place may be attained in other ways when they say, “we wish to augment the concept of a deeply felt sense of place to include another mode of acquisition, namely, one that is constituted by a lifestyle based on mobility” (p. 73).

Cuthbertson et al (1997) forsake the local to an extent and advocate the advantages of considering many places. They argue for a move from “a localized sense of place to a more holistic version” based on interconnectedness among places (p. 73). They contend that,

It is, at best, extremely difficult to judge the relative value of two senses of place (with respect to their contribution to the Earth), one derived from rootedness and the other from mobility. While it may be that the former promotes a strong connection to a specific place, it is quite possible that the latter promotes an equally emphatic connection to a larger whole. (p. 74)

While there might be value in these wider interconnections the actual question of how local place relations may be developed through outdoor travel is an issue that has yet to be satisfactorily answered. Stewart (2003b) also reviews the issue of mobility and rootedness, but makes no firm conclusion. He tentatively speculates that outdoor educators may experience a degree of connection to many places, although not exceptionally deep.

Yet, as demonstrated by some travel writers, a deep sense of attachment to land that is not ‘home’, in the truest sense, appears possible. Perhaps the best example of this is Barry Lopez’s (1986) travels through regions of the arctic, documented in a modern classic of place literature, Arctic Dreams. Much of what these writers have to share is the value of a purposeful approach towards the search for place. By apprenticing themselves to the land through careful attention, through the senses, through repeating actions that the ‘locals’ may have experienced, exploring stories, as well as engaging with natural and cultural histories they move relatively quickly, in Relph’s (1976) terms, to deep understandings and connections with a place.

Wattchow (2005) discusses the theoretical issues that surround how outdoor educators may travel and experience place, distinguishing between different types of connections. Outdoor educators may become aware of an experience of relationships in place as a search for identity and ‘home’. It is possible to become aware of the need for one kind of ‘home’ or centre, a dwelling-as-residing, and also the need for another centre of significance made on journeys within the outdoors, a dwelling-as-wandering (Casey, 1993). Further this search might approach what Relph (1976) calls the experience of the ‘empathetic insider’ who is ‘open’ to the sense of place and is consciously attentive to localised meaning and expressions.

The limited research on the topic to date by Cuthbertson (1999), Stewart (2003a) and Wattchow (2006, 2007, 2008) is marked by considerable tensions. Cuthbertson (1999) builds on the notion of, and possibility for, conscious and empathetic travels in place. He argues that this may occur by changing some of the ways that travel commonly occurs in outdoor activity/education, ways identified as challenges to place connection. Based upon his doctoral research into the lived-experience of tertiary education students on extended outdoor expeditions Cuthbertson (1999) says, “we learned that mobility in moderation, part of what could be called a ‘conscientized travel’, creates extremely strong bonds to place” (p. 111). However, research into participation in a one-off three-week long bushwalk by Stewart (2003a) led him to suggest that while participant learning was environmentally specific, difficulty was experienced by participants in building place connections. In regards to travel, Stewart (2003a) concludes that the journey-based model of outdoor programs is inappropriate
for building place relationships. This conclusion is made from a single case and excludes the possibility of place relations built up through travel over time, return visits, different approaches to leadership, style of travel and the like, all points which the author rightly recommends for further research. Wattchow’s (2006, 2007, 2008) research into Australian undergraduate outdoor education students from multiple degree programs at two different universities, examined how participants responded subjectively to a variety or river-places on paddling journeys in south-eastern Australia. This work paints a complex picture of participants’ Romantic constrictions of ‘wild’ rivers and how the student paddlers’ attention was continually drawn towards the technical demands of moving water environments. Both these phenomena, Wattchow argued, are problematic for the development of responsiveness to the richer ecological and historical potential that all river places offer to learners. Even so, the research also revealed how some participants were able to develop a powerful sense of attachment to certain sections of rivers, particularly when their was minimal ‘sense of danger’ for the participants, and how this attachment was primarily a result of heightened sensory experience.

These studies raise many interesting questions for outdoor educators. How should outdoor educators, particularly when working with learners or clients in the field, consider the pedagogical implications and limitations of certain outdoor activities? Do certain approaches to programming outdoor activities tend to result in participants ‘constructing’ outdoor places in certain kinds of ways? And how do outdoor educators and guides who have developed a deep personal sense of place for a particular landscape incorporate that into their pedagogical practices? Whilst it is impossible and inappropriate to generalize from this study into three guides on the Snowy River, the research findings presented below may continue to focus outdoor educators’ attention on these important issues.

**Re-telling the Snowy River**

So, how did the guides work with their clients on the Snowy in terms of their sense of place attachments to the river? This section of the paper presents findings from the research and discusses how the guides constructed the Snowy River as ‘adventure ground’ and also how their commitment to their clients ‘needs’ influenced their guiding practices. It reveals how the guides deliberately and inadvertently promoted certain cultural constructions of the Snowy River to their clients. Through their stories it becomes possible to interpret the challenges they faced in terms of responding to their place attachment to the Snowy and how this also impacted upon their clients.

**Theme One: It was a great adventure.**

This section is arranged and presented as a narrative journey towards, and through, ‘The Gorge’ section of the river, which serves as the quintessential example of ‘adventure ground’ on the Snowy River. The narrative reveals how place may be experienced under an ‘adventure paradigm’. The findings highlight how the river guides-as-educators carried a pre-existing ‘taste for adventure’ to the Snowy River and come to act as an adventure role models for those they travel with.

A sense of adventure may begin to build throughout the preparation and planning for a trip and long before participants reach the river. A journey from home to the remote ‘put in’ point on the river, from the familiar place to an unknown ‘edge of the world’ kind of place, served to build on the sense of seriousness and adventure. These terms are all imbued with positive connotations for the guides, if not for the participants, at least initially. Julien described how this sense builds throughout the approach to the river and the beginning of a trip.

So it’s really a sense that you’re a long way from anywhere…you drive up and you leave Buchan, which is the last town, it’s still hours you know by bus from Buchan till you get to the…and there’s a couple of spots where you get to look down into the Little River Gorge and
WOW! WOW! This is the edge of the world kind of place… I like the kids to get that sense that, people to get that sense that, it’s not just a dawdle down the river it’s a serious trip. (Julien, Interview 1)

A sense of adventure emerges from the novelty of exploring unknown places and may be sustained while travelling along the river that is not yet known. Bronwyn says of her first trip on the river,

It was a good trip, just a real adventurous trip…no one knew what was round the next corner so it was just really nice to see it with fresh eyes for everyone, there was no one there that had seen it before so yeah it’s not often that you get, to go down a river…and have that. Usually there’s someone that’s been down there before. (Bronwyn, Interview 1)

Julien says of an early experience of his on the river,

It was a great adventure because… it was the sort of river that every turn has something new. (Julien, Interview 1)

New places are, almost by definition, grounds for adventure and conversely a positive consideration of adventure highly values the novelty of the place. The notions of danger, risk and adventure are introduced to participants at a very early stage. Julien’s comments about the safety talk, immediately prior to getting on to the river for the first time, establish a common ‘tone’ of seriousness towards a moving water river at the start of the trip.

It’s always great to do the safety talk and do it with quite a lot of seriousness so they understand that white-water can be dangerous. (Julien, Interview 2)

This ‘tone’ is one that is frequently fostered by the guide in order to build the sense of anticipation, at times fear, and adventure. Bronwyn expresses how, for her, the sense of adventure is a positive and motivating force.

I enjoy a…heightened sense of state, so having your heart beat and being a little bit worried and not sure how exactly it’ll turn out…makes you want to get up and put that wet wetsuit on, and get going…there might be a little bit of adventure out there, and the unexpected might happen, it’s unlikely to be predictable … like not having the same thing happen every day. (Bronwyn, Interview 3)

The ‘heart of adventure’ is undoubtedly expressed in the journey through Tulloch Ard Gorge. After a prolonged build up the A-frame, the first major rapid in the gorge, serves as a ‘gateway to adventure’. On entry to the gorge, danger and risk immediately confront participants, as well as the guide, as Chris’ story about a wayward boat suggests.

This one particular one didn’t eddy out in time for the A-frame…and they ended up getting sucked completely through the A-frame! Five people, a boat, all the gear, sucked through the bottom of the A-frame, that’s the most horrendous thing I’ve ever seen…I just saw a guy who’s got his head above the water and pulled the boat off him and tried to yank him out, he’s like ‘leave me, there’s a bloke further down’…managed to…use the water pressure to peel the boat back off and pull this kid out…[my partner] has gone out across the top of the cliffs for the three people that have been flushed through…then [he’s] called down and said, ‘I’ve sprained my ankle’, (laughter)…so I’ve climbed up to him and he’s…broken his tibia and fibula clean….I took two kids, two of the fittest kids and we walked out to make radio contact…organized a ‘chopper’… it took us nine hours to get up and down to make that radio call and it was just a huge day. (Chris, Interview 1)

Despite the considerable seriousness of the situation, Chris may encapsulate the highly skilled guides’ positive attitude towards adventure when he says,

Yeah that was probably the biggest epic I’ve ever had, um, that was incredible but it was a brilliant trip. (Chris, Interview 1)
Julien tells a story about his first trip on the river and demonstrates how the guide moves to assure participants that confronting risk and adventure on entering an unknown setting, such as Tulloch Ard Gorge, is a positive experience.

Coming round the first corner the guys were saying like, ‘this is it’, that’s the ‘A-frame’ down there…its almost like the whole land features, like the big cliffs on the left come down to meet at the ‘A-frame’ and there’s big cliffs on the right…it’s almost like this focal point of the whole river… and you’ve got those entry rapids, which are not super hard, but you need to be aware and you need to manage each one well enough, because you know that if something happens you’re funnelling into a rock sieve down the bottom, and that it’s serious…that was really exciting, and I remember saying to the group I was with; “this is the first time I’ve been down here” and they’re like “No, this is dangerous” and I said “No this is great! We get to explore it together”, “We get to find out [together]”… that’s how I like to run all my trips. (Julien, interview 1)

The influence of the experienced guide as an ‘adventure role model’ may also extend well beyond participants on school programs. Julien describes a trip through the gorge with a group of guides-in-training under his mentorship. The sense of adventure is again brought to the fore and effectively the process of enculturating the next generation of leaders is under way. Julien’s description highlights the attention and interest given to the individual psychological response to the ‘adventure’.

I just took my Cert IV’s [Post secondary students taking a certificate course in river guiding with a Technical and Further Education institution] a couple of weeks ago down the Snowy, and as I said to them at the end, the biggest thrill for me was not was not running the rapids or anything like that but was to sit on that rock at Gentle Annie and to look at their faces as they looked into the river… you could see the fear in their eyes, you could see the adventure, you could see the…the awe of what it was just to look at that rapid…and it was great, it was. Everyone had…a different emotion on their face. (Julien, Interview 1)

To varying degrees the feelings of participants range from unease and nervousness through to feeling ‘out of place’, alienated, and threatened by the perceived dangers of their immediate surroundings. These feelings are temporarily accepted in the early stages of the river journey, indeed these may be considered necessary prerequisites for an adventure. The assumption is that these temporary feelings may be overcome through control and success both of which result from training. The path to comfort and ‘at-homeness’ in the place subsequently comes through technical skills acquisition and knowledge and the resulting sense of control. For a successful adventure through the gorge considerable preparation is necessary. Julien describes how he considers skills and river knowledge to be important for participants in the early parts of the river journey.

If we’re rafting it’s a lot about how to raft, it’s about hydrology, it’s about…gaining an understanding of travelling on whitewater that first day. And it’s great, the kids have to learn to load the rafts the kids have to learn to waterproof their packs they have to learn the safety talk, the whitewater float position. (Julien, Interview 2)

The guide holds the understanding that, for participants, a sense of comfort will come through skill acquisition and subsequently achievement of ‘the successful adventure’.

Looking for the V at the top looking for the wave train at the bottom, they get to apply what they know, they get to learn and they get to have success which gives them confidence and again it’s about them going from feeling really out of place because they’ve come from the city into this pretty remote um world to suddenly gaining an understanding of that world and understanding that the world is not hostile and alien to them and understanding that they have, can quite easily have the skills, with a little bit of training and a little bit of information, to be quite comfortable in that environment. (Julien, Interview 2).

Moving further into the gorge, the rapids begin to acquire a more positive character, which reflects on the surroundings.
A rapid like George’s Mistake…it’s a nice rapid ‘cause you can generally run it with self guided rafts which is great ‘cause they [the clients] get to scout it, they get to look at it, they get to ‘ooh’ and “ahhh” at …‘cause it looks pretty big but really it’s just a bunch of bouncing. Once they achieve it their sense of achievement sky rockets and they really love being on the river and I guess there’s a sense, yeah a sense of achievement, a sense of loving being where they are, loving what they’re doing. (Julien, Interview 2)

And the need to develop technical skills means that the new guide may struggle to adequately address participants’ other needs and, by inference, educational aspects of the program. Julien again refers to his first trip on the river when he says,

I think it’s important to develop a certain level of skills before you start becoming a guide…and if I reflect back on my first experience…I was very nervous about the whole skills idea because you’d go down the river and you were very worried about if your skills were up to the river, and whether you were going to get down there safely…I was extremely worried about whether my skills could deal with the river, so as a result my focus wasn’t as much on my clients as they could have been. And in that first couple of experiences…I was nowhere near the guide that I probably am now, because guiding is about others, it’s never about you. Like if you’re worrying about how cold you are or the fact that you’re hungry or the fact that you’re scared of a rapid, you’re not a good guide. (Julien, Interview 3)

The guides placed a high priority on technical competence, including the ability to interpret the river environment in fine detail as it relates to the activity of white water rafting. This involved more than simply keeping their clients safe. The guides believed it is crucial to teach each client the fundamental skills and knowledge required to run the river. Not only does this make the trip safer for all concerned but it is required, according to the guides, as it provides the foundation for the clients to develop a level of comfort on the river, which they were initially encouraged to perceive as a place full of dangers. How the guides responded to their clients needs, and how this influences educational possibilities on the river, is discussed more fully in the following theme.

**Theme Two: Taking the experience where the client needs it.**

The narrative findings for Theme Two – ‘Taking the experience where the client needs it’ suggests that the guide often acted as neutral conduit for the needs of both participants and the educational institutions that the participants came from. The guides frequently referred to people and organizations in their work environment as ‘clients’ and adopted a service culture. The guides’ role was articulated as serving a variety of pre-determined agendas of the ‘outsider’. Even the guides’ own agendas, where they concern the particularities of the local environment and the possibilities for a place-responsive pedagogy, were by-and-large suppressed.

Amongst the guides a strong ‘service culture’ emerged. There was a focus on responding and fulfilling the needs of participants and educational institutions, both of which came to be considered as ‘clients’. A focus on ‘client’ needs may emerge from raft guide training and which generally has a commercial focus rather than an educational one. Chris says of his own training course run by a commercial company,

That was excellent training…yeah, pretty amazing…they’d talk about how to actually run a bunch of clients down there and look after them you know, with cooking and just make sure that the whole experience was just really well balanced. (Chris, Interview 1)

Julien expands on the importance of the guide responding to the needs of the ‘client’.

Very much I deliver from the perspective of my own beliefs… so my beliefs are very much about the guide…needing to be aware of everything that’s involved in the experience, and very much taking the experience where the clients need it to be. (Julien, Interview 3)
Again Julien reiterates the importance of responding to client needs and emphasises a commercial focus for guides-in-training under his mentorship.

I was taking my certificate IV students down there and the focus was very much on...them being a guide. I was... delivering and assessing a unit called ‘Guide rafting trips for clients’ ...we were trying to give them a sense of what it was like to be a guide in that environment...we had a commercial focus and at the end of the day we sat down and said... ‘well, if I was paying for this trip would I get value for money’. (Julien, Interview 3)

So, are they comfortable? Are they warm?...their physical needs and also their emotional needs. Why are they there? Why have they forked out so much money? Why have they decided to employ you as a guide to go down that river? And, and to meet those, those client needs...your client needs on the river are super important. (Julien, Interview 3)

Education for ‘self’, ‘others/group’ and ‘environment’ are terms that tend to come to the fore and may reflect adherence to the well known and established outdoor education theory by the ‘client’ or the guide. Even when the Snowy is judged as a ‘great river’, it may only be in terms of how it fits the pre-determined template established by the common definitions of outdoor education.

I do weave in my own agenda, environmental awareness is definitely a strong one...and depending on...what the client needs are like, an understanding of self and self awareness on the river is a great one because it’s a great river to do that... I think an understanding of group is another great one because I don’t think you can get down the river in a lot of cases without being aware of who you’re with. (Julien, Interview 3)

In regards to educational reasons for guiding on the Snowy, Julien suggests that the guide-as-educator must respond to a variety of different, predetermined, and interchangeable program agendas which happen to be considered important by educational institutions that employ river guides.

I mean that’s very much client driven...we have a different curriculum for every group we go down, and everyone has a different set agenda... I weave in my own agenda to a certain degree but really we are employed to work on a certain curriculum and we will have two or three things for every group that we need to work on. (Julien, Interview 3)

Bronwyn’s comments also demonstrate a tendency to consider outdoor education theory, aims or goals as ‘universals’ that remain, in the main, context free and immunized against the local.

It doesn’t matter which context you’re working, the ultimate responsibility is to keep people physically and emotionally safe. And then under that, is just to provide a really good experience that meets whatever criteria the groups happening, whether that be adventure, or personal development, or environmental education, or whatever it may be. (Bronwyn, Interview 3)

In addressing these pre-constructed educational agendas, Bronwyn hints at how the experience may need to be crafted or contrived by the guide-as-educator in order to successfully fulfill the expectations that have been established.

You know, creating situations, and manipulating who’s in rafts, and all that sort of thing, to push people, and give them an experience that you think they’re after. (Bronwyn, Interview 3)

Sometimes the focus on providing for the ‘client’ or the experience people may ‘want’, can create a reluctance to speak for themselves or of their own experience. Bronwyn says,

I think as a guide, whether it be in an educational or commercial setting, you’re really not there for you, you’re there for the people you’re with. And what are they after? And do they feel like it’s their trip, and their adventure, and that they’ve achieving what they want to achieve out of it? (Bronwyn, Interview 3)
The educational institutions and the participants may have particular ideas about what they intend to gain from outdoor travel as an educational experience. As Raffan (1992) suggests, these cultural expectations are developed far from the river and are, by and large, inflexible once they are brought to the river. They impact upon participant, guide and the experience of the river as a place itself. The guide-as-educator while attempting to open possibilities to move outside the river corridor, and outside some of the expectations, also appears to be resigned to these opportunities being declined.

So in designing I try and…give people an awareness about…what’s outside the river as well, they don’t always want it, you can’t always convince them to do that, they just want to focus on the river and that’s fine. (Julien, Interview)

In what may be a particular interpretation of the experiential education theories, which underscore much outdoor education, the educational focus turns toward individual learning. For the guide-as-educator this manifests as a hesitation to ‘speak’ for and about the many histories and stories embedded in the river place.

I’ve been told a lot of stories about the Snowy… on a couple of trips we’ve even got somebody, a local, to come in and tell the history of the Snowy from their perspective, and that was great, but what I found to a large degree is that… every trip needs to be individual and while stories can give a sense of history you have to be careful that you don’t overdo the stories because it … takes away the ability for them to experience their own trip…and I don’t tend to tell a lot of stories ‘cause I like the kids to tell their own, and have their own story, and have their own experience because you know I want them to reflect on what they’re doing there and then, and not as much about what someone else has done in the past. (Julien, Interview 2)

**Final reflections from the river.**

The findings in the primary research areas (*Theme One* and *Theme Two*) of this study indicated that river guides often did not respond to the particulars of the Snowy River beyond the instrumental knowledge required for running the river, when they worked as adventure role models who are providing a service to their education clients. Much of the literature to date has identified the mobility and travel as the chief threat to place-responsiveness in outdoor education, however this research indicates this is not the locus of the problem. Rather, in this case, it was generalized expectations about outdoor education, on behalf of both the guides and their clients, which served as barriers to the development of deeper place relationships in their river journeys. The most restrictive of these operated under the confines of an ‘adventure paradigm’. To focus on individual psychological effects of challenging experiences seemed to deny the importance of the many other educational possibilities in a place like the Snowy River (including its ecology, geography, history, and so on). The interpretations of ‘experiential’ education held by the river guides privileged context free individual learning over the development of relationships with a particular outdoor place. These interpretations reflect the common interest outdoor education practitioners in Australia have in ‘personal development’. Adherence to these well established and ingrained objectives and practices in outdoor education continues to consign places to be experienced as mere educational ‘spaces’. As the review of place literature has suggested, any attempt to address a generalized ‘environment’ remains problematic when it comes to encouraging outdoor education interest in a more place specific pedagogy.

Yet the findings of this study raise the possibility that guides-as-educators may be in a unique position to negotiate between activity, participants and place. Through telling stories of experiences on the Snowy River, experienced guides-as-educators have articulated a deep sense of belonging there. These three river guides have clearly articulated their sense of belonging to the Snowy and their long-term commitment to the river. These experienced guides-as-educators appear poised to practice a place-responsive pedagogy, however they are...
faced with the considerable challenge of being unendorsed by current structures and values of outdoor education. What may be required is a cultural shift in emphasis that re-evaluates the educational potential and power of place. Ironically, the river guides-as-educators themselves are making this cultural shift in their own lives. When it comes to passion for, and knowledge of, a place like the Snowy they are a potentially significant resource for their clients and the institutions that they come from.

The guides-as-educators have a love for the place, which becomes a basis for inspiring and educating others.

I guess when you educate people in the outdoors… it’s hard to go beyond the fact that unless you have a passion for it, that it’s hard to inspire them to have a passion for what you do. So one of the things I love about the Snowy was it was easy to get a passion for the place. (Julien, interview 1)

The guides-as-educators told many stories of assisting participants’ discovery of their surroundings and creating an awareness of the river. Julien says,

I try and share that excitement about the river with the people I travel with…like I generally put lots of sticks in at the beaches to see whether it’s going up or down …because they see it as a really static place… and they’re like, “The river’s not moving is it?” and I go, “Yeah, yeah I think it’s rising” and they’re like “Yeah, whatever”. And then to come back an hour later and say “Look, see that stick we put in” and they’re like, “Wow”. Like it’s very hard to tell, as you know, that the river’s risen or fallen just by looking at it…and they’ll get a sense that it’s alive and moving now… so getting them to experience for themselves what’s happening in the environment you’re in. (Julien, Interview 2)

An embodiment of the place may occur in many ways, often outside the activity of paddling. Bronwyn gives an example of occasionally circumventing the ‘risk narrative’ in a way that is more likely to foster a ‘sense’ of the place.

I’m a bit naughty and let kids wear, just walk around in bare feet, on sand beaches in the middle of the gorge, and that sort of thing. (Bronwyn, Interview 2)

Similarly, Chris demonstrates a shedding of some technologies that may physically separate the body from place.

Let’s swim some of the smaller rapids…just allowing them to, just feeling a little bit more about it. (Chris, Interview 3)

If outdoor educators intend to embrace a place-responsive pedagogy, their own journey of deepening into place may be considered as a starting point. This requires those who act as mentors of leaders-in-training to encourage such a journey. Long-term association with, and knowledge or, particular outdoor places could come to stand side-by-side with technical competency as an important attribute for outdoor guides. These research findings should provide optimism to those who wish to work towards a place-responsive outdoor education pedagogy for the Snowy River.

In summary, we cautiously offer four main points for the broader outdoor education community to consider if the potential for a place-responsive pedagogy is to be realized in the future.

- There is a need for guides to receive more than technical and competency based training and assessment if a place-responsive approach to guiding is to be realised. If outdoor education intends to adopt a ‘place-paradigm’ then the training of outdoor educators themselves must be seriously re-considered. This would include a deeper experience and knowledge of specific places.
- The findings of this study signal a need for educational institutions that recruit outdoor guides to consider the guide’s association with the location of the program, and to respect
the guides’ knowledge and experience by endorsing them as negotiators of place responsive learning experiences.

- The commonplace assumption that outdoor education can educate for personal and social relations under an adventure-paradigm as well as ‘the environment’ is called into question by this research. The conflict between these multiple aims means that programs need to become more focused in what they attempt to achieve rather than claiming to address all of these educational goals at one time and in one place.

- If outdoor education is concerned with more than personal and social development then the journey based ‘expedition’ model must be replaced with a style of travel intentionally concerned with deepening into place.

Each of the river guides in this research seem eminently well placed, once given the cultural license, to work with their outdoor education clients to achieve a much fuller understanding and experience of the Snowy River. Over their many years working on the river they had developed a deeper knowledge of the river’s history, its ecological problems, of interesting side trips and stories about local characters. The conclusion reached by one of the guides may serve as a salient reminder to other outdoor educators.

It’s just a bit broader focus, taking it away from what just may have been an initial attraction of ‘white water, yahoo, lets go!’ you know, drop those massive rapids … Exposing people to a little bit more of that whole environment than just the really narrow focus of maybe ten meters, fifteen metres in front of them as they plunge off some falling rapid… ‘cause I always found I could very easily just get totally sucked in by just the thrills and spills of the river … I just try and remember there’s a whole lot more to it than that tiny little bit of water at the bottom. (Chris, Interview 3)

References


