The consensus of the authors in this collection is that their cultures are moving away from desired relationships to nature, towards activities and settings that are more globalised, more technological, more urban and more destructive. As a response to this increasingly undesirable trend they consider the Scandinavian social tradition of ‘friluftsliv.’

Friluftsliv roughly translates as ‘open-air life,’ and emphasises the role and value of spending time in the outdoors. Its Scandinavian practitioners argue that the widespread acceptance of traditional outdoor practices produces a healthy society founded on sound relationships to nature and that these practices are central to national life and identity.

It is not just undesirable trends in Western culture which are of concern to the authors, but the deficiencies of standard outdoor education practice as a response to these trends. Canadian Editor Bob Henderson’s introduction says that the book sets out to critique many current conventions in common outdoor educational practices. For him an over-emphasis on skill development, personal growth and technological conveniences distracts attention from nature as ‘home,’ and may weaken outdoor education’s potential for a profound re-orientation towards nature in modern life.

Contributors on these questions are predominantly Canadian and Norwegian, but outdoor educators from other European countries, Australia and USA are also included. The contributions are grouped on regional lines: the book has sections from Scandinavians, Canadians and ‘the rest,’ or International.

The 13 Scandinavian contributors explain how their particular natural settings and geographies have led them to a set of admirable relationships to nature. Dahle, Faarlund, Kvaløy-Sætereng, Gelter, Sandell, Jensen and Ulstrup agree that friluftsliv is complex and diverse but culturally unifying, a set of values and customs that supports engagement with nature that is creative, traditional, open, simple, slow, operating in stable but informal social units such as family and friends and in the absence of sophisticated technologies.

Nils Vikander’s introduction in particular sets out the specific geographical and historical situation in Norway that makes friluftsliv such a successful response to place. He comments on the advantages of rights of open access to land, both public and private, low population density, rugged but accessible hills, mountains, forests and waterways. Such places are often not readily open to exploitation for other purposes, being protected in some degree by climate and terrain.

In this picture friluftsliv originates in indigenous relationships to land in Scandinavia: long-established, predating modernity, with traditions and practices that are spiritual and mythic—but under attack in an increasingly technological world.

The contributors vary in the ways they see friluftsliv as a method of resisting destructive change. Some suggest that the local place is the one to start from, and that practitioners can learn from human and natural history in their own setting, or from consciously building their own and their students’ relationships with local places through their experiences.

Others, like Hvenegaard and Asfeldt, who write from a Canadian perspective, propose the use of carefully contrived programs (often using adventure), and settings (often wilderness) to step back into traditional or past practices and technologies and even spiritualities, that are far from the distractions and seductions of everyday life. Here the challenge is how to be ethical and appreciative and to use the experience to critique or change one’s habits in normal life.

Some internal contradictions are accepted in such programs, including freeze drying large amounts of food to live from, travelling long distances to suitable destinations, and the use of modern gear. More damagingly, the very personal perspectives offered ignore or play down the reality that very few people could ever be ‘at home’ in wilderness. Even if...
they could, as the recent film ‘Into the Wild’ (and Jon Krakauer’s book on which the film is based) highlights, it is unclear how the experience would enable them to successfully critique the fundamentals of modern living.

Little attention is paid by either of the above groups to urban places and activities in their examples of practice or programs: the common assumption of most of the authors is that the ‘normal’ way of life of most Western people is in some way the adversary to be faced, or the illness to be cured.

Papers by the Norwegian authors in particular show an uneasy tension over how friluftsliv is responding to change. Although Ese reports on conflict in Norway between those who explicitly reject activities and gadgets that are ‘modern’ and come from ‘an international leisure activity culture,’ and those who embrace more flexible adaptations of joy in the outdoors, or ‘Adventuretainment,’ Norwegian authors in this book are mainly traditionalists. Whilst some tentatively explore how friluftsliv might adapt to new forms of consumerism, and to a new youthful and urban demographic, others suggest its enduring value depends on rejection or avoidance of such changes. For them, only some activities are acceptable: those that emphasize joy in nature under strict conditions.

These authors are strongly nationalistic, or accept that friluftsliv is and should be so, and generally unconcerned about how the romantic origins and style of friluftsliv might affect its influence or relevance: for example in potentially favouring some kinds of activity (adventure) or landscape (grand, mountainous) over others.

Addressing this conflict Tordsson suggests that more research would be useful in testing some of the more ideological claims. He shows how friluftsliv has evolved to suit changing political and social objectives and circumstances in the past, and suggests it will do so again. Further, Gåsdel presents social research that shows that Americans and Canadians appear as attached to the natural world as Norwegians. If this is so, is it in fact friluftsliv that enables Norwegians to integrate modern life more effectively with nature than others? Or rather, is friluftsliv itself a luxury by-product of material and environmental wealth and long-term social uniformity and stability? This question is skirted around but not directly addressed.

A further version of this question is posed by a stimulating Preface to the book by Andrew Brookes and Børge Dahle: What is the possibility or desirability of the transposition of this particular philosophy and practice beyond Norway, and to formal practices in education? The lessons from this concept and practice may not be easily interpreted by education systems or happily applied in countries that are geographically and culturally distinct. A further difficulty with the extension of friluftsliv into ‘standard outdoor education’ is that educational practices that depend on spontaneity and open-endedness themselves become liable to orthodoxy and atrophy when included in an education system.

Authors’ views on these matters range from a rather adulatory: ‘How can we be more like Norway in our pursuit of outdoor life?’ to some careful and detailed accounts of their own programs, with a reflective look at Norway.

However, for me a more serious problem is, what version of tradition should shape people’s activities and relationships in the colonised world? This is a question that goes far beyond outdoor education, at least in Australia, as the ‘history wars’ debate that simmered away during the Howard years shows. These arguments were about how national stories should be told, as such stories contribute to a national culture and identity. One aspect of the problem is that the relationships to nature of the indigenous people, who can truly claim tradition in this matter, usually bear little resemblance to those of multiple transplanted cultures. These in outdoor education, tend to be reminiscent of European colonial exploration and military adventure overlaid with modern technology.

From this perspective, the casual comment by Loynes that cultural identity for Americans “might be rooted in the idea of the pioneer, the cowboy, the settler or the Native People” (p. 270) is quite startling: the last of these groups is dramatically different from the others, and it is not clear how a coherent cultural identity could emerge from the amalgam suggested—especially since generally exploitative practices by pioneers, cowboys and settlers have not been very helpful as a foundation for better relationships with nature.

Colonial relationships were built from the first principle of denial of indigenous culture. It followed from this that wilderness was the enforced absence of the traditional owners; the settlement culture was unwilling/unable to allow indigenous culture to shape it; and methods of settlement and conquest became the foundation of national myths and cultural traditions. It is a pity, therefore, that the book does not include work from Higgins or Nicol, whose work on the Highland Clearances in Scotland gives an insight into how colonising processes can erode or destroy productive human-nature relationships.

At the core of the diverse interpretations of friluftsliv offered by the papers lie the contradictions enshrined in the life of Nansen. The great Norwegian explorer is internationally celebrated as a model of outdoor life, but a good deal of his inspirational value lies in what Dahle describes as “military survival
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practices” (p. 28) in wilderness settings. Such qualities and achievements have had a great deal of influence on outdoor education and recreation in North America and Australia. Nansen in fact is known much more for his engagement with nature as risk, adventure and exploration than with quieter, more familiar, local engagement, although Gelter and Repp refer to his general philosophy on interconnectedness with nature in daily life as well as wilderness settings, and to his humanitarian and other interests. Friluftsliv itself can be seen as both, but authors tend to advocate for one style or the other of practice without acknowledging adequately that there are some inherent contradictions between them.

Some ideas that have spilled over into outdoor education practice from this historical background are about leadership, survival, heroism and other desired character traits or behaviors, the construction of the ‘expedition’ for purposes of ‘exploration,’ requiring skills used in journeying to map, name and contain the new domain. Consider the standing of ‘The Man from Snowy River’ in Australia, or the ‘West’ in the US. It is not surprising that such myths often evoke anti-nature or conquest-of-nature images, not ones about being ‘at home.’ In them, home is usually seen as the bit that is ‘carved out of’ the wilderness, not integrated into it.

Michigan teacher Molly Baker offers a way through this legacy. She quotes Aldo Leopold: “We must recognize that as a society we are not in the habit of relating to land in a direct and intentional way.” She critiques many standard outdoor education programs which fail to confront what this ‘direct and intentional’ relationship might mean. Instead, she says, they rely on adventure and fail to consider the places they work in, and she attacks ‘landless’ trips that concentrate on interpersonal skills, travel skills, equipment skills and general claims to learning about nature through observing some pretty sunsets, wild storms or native animals. The only possible continuation or educational extension of such experiences is to tell tales of previous encounters and from specific cultural arrangements with nature will necessarily arise from their daily lives. Outdoor educators need to accept this fact. Too many of them seem to be caught in a dissonance between the world they actually live in and a romantic vision of a purer world. For most people no such dissatisfaction exists, or at least it is not clear to them that ‘going back to nature’ would address their unease. Outdoor education founded on the premise of a fundamental contradiction between nature and modern culture is likely to remain at the margins for all but a few physically, temperamentally, economically, geographically suited to it.

As an alternative, Baker describes in detail a ‘Landfull Framework’ that works on increasing students’ awareness of the detail of the place that they are in, explores stories of a peopled landscape, develops personal connections to place, and considers land as a form of home.

Another fruitful approach is suggested in papers by MacEachren and Wattchow. Both authors argue for a craft based approach to learning about and journeying in a place. This is an important part of friluftsliv, but also a powerful educational process shared with other well known systems. MacEachren persuasively connects her commitment to craft to other elements of outdoor education: mainstream skills, connections with other kinds of knowing, access questions, and educational systems.

‘Nature First’ is significant because its international scope gives it standing and interest: there are few such publications in outdoor education literature. The origins of the book, the source and purpose of the material collected here, isn’t clearly explained but it offers many sincere, detailed and careful thoughts about outdoor education practice in several countries. Some papers accept standard outdoor education clichés and their authors don’t seem aware that some of these have been seriously contested by research. A few just outline and advocate friluftsliv values, or standard outdoor education practices set in a different rhetorical justification. The general lack of a research focus means that some papers allow the tastes and values that are held by their authors to become the main justification for their practice. Most contributors pay little attention to geography, or to human and natural history as vital elements that shape people and place. Use of material and skills from these disciplines can infuse places with a lot of interest.

The lack of female contributors is striking in a book that purports to be about inclusivity. Perhaps friluftsliv is more masculinist than the editors like to admit?

For most people any foundational relationships with nature will necessarily arise from their daily encounters and from specific cultural arrangements of place and space and activity that are built into their lives. Outdoor educators need to accept this fact. Too many of them seem to be caught in a dissonance between the world they actually live in and a romantic vision of a purer world. For most people no such dissatisfaction exists, or at least it is not clear to them that ‘going back to nature’ would address their unease. Outdoor education founded on the premise of a fundamental contradiction between nature and modern culture is likely to remain at the margins for all but a few physically, temperamentally, economically, geographically suited to it.

About the author

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