Reinvigorating our love of our home range: exploring the connections between sense of place and outdoor education.

Abstract

We all live our lives in particular places. These places play a role in shaping who we are, what we believe in and what we can do. Particular places are important to everyone. Our connections with place(s) are shaped by the place itself and our experiences of them. Our knowledge of places, through experience, can transform an unknown space into a known place. This paper examines some of the understandings of outdoor education and a sense of place in order to explore connection between these concepts. While the nomadic aspects of outdoor education may make it difficult to develop a deep-rooted sense of place, learning to be in place, exploring its detail, and not treat it as a thing or commodity, may contribute to developing stronger connections with our home places.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot.

Wandering through the bush I struggle to hear it speak for the noise of the group. The students around me talk excitedly about our trip, what we have seen and what is yet to come. I step off the track and let them pass. Peace and quiet soon follows in their footsteps. I stop, I wait… and listen to the bush around me talking; it has much to say if you have the patience to listen. The whisper of the trees returns. The birds begin again to chatter to each other. The leaves close by rustle and a lizard pops its head out, seemingly to check that it is again safe to come out. What is the bush saying? I cannot be sure. I am conscious of projecting my understanding onto the messages I am receiving. Is it ambivalence, acceptance or resentment? I would like to think it is acceptance, my heart tells me that it is, but my rational side projects a cloud of doubt. Who is to say the bush has anything to say, it’s only bush after all. Trees, shrubs, lichens, animals, rocks, water, it’s all the same, just things that make up the bush, things to be used. But there is something greater here, something bigger than the sum of its parts!

I often have an internal battle over whether or not I should take students into the bush, and even whether or not I should go myself. Part of me says that if I am genuine in my concern for saving the natural environment then I shouldn't take others there and I would stay home myself. Another side of me argues that students will be taken into the bush and I would rather have a say in how and what they learn. I also like to think that by taking students into the bush I can play a part in awakening them to the many voices of the bush, to show them that there is something about the bush that is greater than the sum of its parts. In fact, this is one of the main reasons I like taking people into the bush and why I have become an outdoor educator. But as someone who loves natural places this is never an easy debate to resolve.

In a country and society where it is relatively easy to escape and ‘go bush’, I often contemplate how outdoor education is to provide a different perspective. I am particularly concerned with how outdoor education is to expand the conceptual world of students, to give them a glimpse of what it means to be merely a member of the biotic community rather than a conqueror of it, as Leopold (1949) puts forward in his land ethic. In an educational experience I feel it is not good enough to visit an area like a tourist. To rush in and conduct an activity and rush out again is disrespectful, damaging to the environment and only adds to the problem. Treating a place as merely a venue for an activity doesn’t allow time for that place to have a say, to be ‘heard’ by the participants. For me, if outdoor education is concerned only with education in the environment and about the environment, it will only contribute to environmental destruction, and thus fail;
it must also be education for the environment. Incorporating the voice of place into outdoor programs can build connections, dialogue and relationships between people and their environment, a sense of place. This paper is a search for understanding, an exploration of the connections between outdoor education and developing a sense of place.

Outdoor Education
Outdoor education in a formal sense, as a subject, is relatively new to Australia, yet education out of doors is as old as humanity. Correspondingly, the objectives and practices of outdoor education are quite varied and diverse, with a range of outdoor activities being used as a means of learning. As the practices of outdoor education are diverse so are the definitions of what the subject covers. For Donaldson and Donaldson (1973, p. 7)

outdoor education is education in, about and for the outdoors. Its guiding principle is that famous statement of L.B. Sharp's: “Those things which can best be taught outdoors should there be taught”. Its raison d'être is that twentieth century people have removed themselves from the land–and both they and the land are worse for it. Its methodology is as old as humanity–learning by using the senses out where the subject matter exists.

More recently, Knapp (1990, p. 28) defines outdoor education as “the use of resources outside the formal school classroom to meet educational goals and objectives”. Ford (1981 in McRae 1990, p. 6) provides a useful review of definitions of outdoor education and concludes that it “involves the use of outdoor settings to enhance teaching and learning in ‘existing curricula’, to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for ‘the wise use’ of ‘leisure pursuits’, or to develop understanding about ‘the outdoors’”.

While it would appear from the literature that there is no one definition of outdoor education, Ford (1981, p. 13) summarizes it well by saying “outdoor education may be viewed as a process, a place, a purpose, and/or a topic”. Given, therefore, that outdoor education is so diverse, I wish here to define outdoor education from my perspective and for the purpose of this paper. My version of outdoor education is one of a leader and a small group (ten or less) travelling light in a natural setting. The group is relatively self-sufficient and self-contained. The trip is of a journey nature with the group moving on most days, but not great distances. The purpose of the experience is to rediscover that we are a part of the natural environment, not apart from it, and to develop a greater understanding of the interconnectedness of our culture (society) and the natural environment. In short, outdoor education is an attempt to provide a lived experience of Leopold’s land ethic.

Sense of Place
Simone Weil has described rootedness in place as “the most important and least recognized need of the human soul” (in Orr 1994, p. 147). We don’t yet, and may never, fully understand the importance particular places have in our lives, how they shape who we are, what we believe in and how we behave. “The nature of modern consciousness has a profound effect on one’s sense of being-in-place, developing a self-centered character who is too often removed physically and emotionally from both community and nature”
Many writers are beginning to express their concern over the way people are becoming placeless, or rootless, and the influence this has on our relationship with the world around us (see for example Seddon 1997; Wattchow 2001). Relph (1976, p. 6), for example, was troubled by the development of signs that placelessness is becoming the dominant force and is anxious about the weakening of the distinct and diverse experiences and identities of places. Particular places are inherently important to everyone. Rediscovering this importance may well be the key to re-establishing meaningful relationships with the earth and finding a better way to look after our ‘place’.

There are many ways to define space, place and sense of place. For me, following Metzner (1995, p. 120), “a place is a localized, concretely defined region, whereas space is the abstract infinity, out of which a place can be defined and delimited, mapped and described”. It is through knowing that comes from experience that space can become place. For Peter Hay (1996, p. 4) “to know a place, one must first know its geographical relationships”. Defining ‘sense of place’ is an increasingly more difficult task. For Relph (1976, p. 63), sense of place is “a full range of possible awareness, from simple recognition for orientation, through the capacity to respond emphatically to the identities of different places, to a profound association with places as cornerstones of human existence and individual identity”. Relph (1976, p. 63) believes sense of place may be “authentic and genuine, or it can be unauthentic and contrived or artificial”. Cuthbertson, Heine and Whitson (1997, p. 72) contend that Relph has characterized sense of place in a hierarchy of physical and social landscape attachment, which he labels as varied levels of “insideness”. The deepest level, existential insideness, “…is home, where your roots are, a centre of safety and security, a field of care and concern, a point of orientation” … The shallowest of levels in Relph’s structure of place is the superficial level of insideness, one in which the visitor is not “…attending in any sensitive way to its qualities or significances”.

This hierarchical model developed by Relph is dependent on a sense of place that is based on different degrees of rootedness. Cuthbertson et al. (1997, p. 72) level criticism at Relph’s notion of developing a deep sense of place through a rooted contact with nature. They argue that for the majority of people in the world it is physically impossible to develop a deep-rooted contact with nature as a result of social, economic and political constraints. Cuthbertson et al. (1997, p. 73) thus conclude that “under present circumstances, then, natural rootedness 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”.

Cuthbertson et al. (1997, p. 73), believing that the dominant approach associates sense of place with the non-mobility of natural rootedness, argue that “the privileged position of natural rootedness serves to restrict access to experiencing a profound sense of place for those who have (or have had) a mobile lifestyle”. I find this perplexing! While both positions are contributing toward gaining a better understanding of sense of place I somehow feel that there is yet more to be known. Sense of place is too complicated and subjective to be reduced to a linear scale or hierarchy: “what people value in their localities will differ from place to place” (King & Clifford 1987, pp. 7-8). Agreeing with Relph,
however, I do not think the transitory elements of society can establish a deep and meaningful sense of place that will result in care and love that our local places need. Cuthbertson et al. (1997, p. 73) make the valid point that:

It is, at best, extremely difficult to judge the relative values of the 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.

While it may be physically impossible to care for the Earth as a whole, I do wonder how it is possible to have a sense of place with a ‘larger whole’. Perhaps it is a collection, or an ecology, of sense of place; an understanding of the sense of place of many places? “In the holistic context of Place, some outdoor educators may possess a deeply felt and profound experienced sense of the inescapable interconnectedness among places” (Cuthbertson et al. 1997, p. 74). Lopez (1987, p. 255), however, as a traveller and a writer sees things differently:

The differing landscapes of the earth are hard to know individually. They are as difficult to engage in conversation as wild animals. The complex feelings of affinity and self-assurance one feels with one’s native place rarely develop again in another landscape.

I would therefore argue, somewhat tentatively, that outdoor educators may well have a sense of place in many places, but will probably never have that deep rooted sense of place that comes from living in the one location. I acknowledge that nomadic indigenous cultures have, or have had, a deep connection to place that we can only dream of, but I do not believe that the nomadic in our western culture can be compared with nomadic indigenous peoples. Our comprehension of the land, and thus our relationship with it, is vastly different.

The subjective nature of sense of place makes it hard to define and I am therefore loath to conclude that one particular method of development leads to more positive outcomes than another. If, however, the different approaches provide a sense of place, or begin the process of developing a sense of place, then all the better. I think the important thing to remember is that sense of place, any degree of sense of place, is essential in discovering the interconnectedness of life. It is time we learned to be-in-place rather than treat it as a thing or a commodity. I now wish to explore the connection between sense of place and outdoor education, and how outdoor education may provide a means to develop stronger connections with our home places.

**Sense of Place and Outdoor Education**

In 1991 the American artist Alan Gussow, delivering the fifth Richard Jones Memorial Lecture in Hobart at the University of Tasmania, made the following observations about place:

The physical landscape is not simply a backdrop to human events, but the stage on which we live. We are not in an audience watching a drama unfold, we are on the stage as players. The events of life take place somewhere, and that somewhere,
wherever it is, affects the perception of the event. The visual landscape gives shape to our character, the objects and the forms in the landscape influence our actions, guide our choices, shape our values, restrict or enhance our freedom, determine where and with what quality we will mix with each other. The landscape in a sense molds our dreams. It locates our fantasies. The landscape in my view is never neutral, it is shaping us even as we shape it.

This would appear to concur with the writings of Relph (1976, p. 47-8) who believes that there are four elements which make a place: three of these are the physical setting, the activities and the meaning. The fourth component is the ‘spirit of a place’, ‘sense of place’ or ‘genius loci’ (Relph 1976, p. 48)

The spirit of a place involves topography and appearance, economic functions and social activities, and particular significance derived from past events and present situations–but it differs from the simple summation of these. Spirit of place can persist in spite of profound changes in the basic components of identity.

Relph provides a valuable means of exploring the connection between sense of place and outdoor education. Ford (1981), as mentioned, defines outdoor education as ‘a process, a place, a purpose, and/or a topic’. When this definition and Relph’s understanding of place are combined ‘a place’ can be understood to mean the physical setting, ‘a process’ the activity, and ‘a purpose’ the meaning. It would appear then that a particular outdoor educational experience would play a role in defining the sense of a place at a given moment in time. For me, this has considerable implications for how and by what means an outdoor education program is to be run, particularly if developing a strong connection with a place is a desirable outcome. It raises a myriad of questions from what activity to use, how the experience is framed, how long the trip should be, through to what role the leader should take on. While to address these questions here is beyond the scope of this paper, the important connection lies in recognizing that the place and the experience shape each other and combined contribute toward the sense of a place at a given moment in time.

Early in the experiential development of students new to outdoor education much of the focus of the program is on the personal development of participants; developing the skills of an activity, learning to live in the bush, feeling comfortable in a new environment. This is essential for it is difficult to develop a positive relationship with the environment around you if you feel threatened by it. However, as students progress, gain more experience, become more comfortable, I believe the focus of the experience must shift from personal development to using all the senses to explore, and hopefully connect with, the environment around them. The educational focus must shift from ‘in’ and ‘about’ the environment to education ‘for’ the environment.

King and Clifford (1987, p. 4) note that:

We love our home range because we know it, or parts of it, intimately. The parish may not hold anything which is remarkable in regional or national terms, but its specialness to its inhabitants is that they are a part of its history and future.
In our transitory society we probably do not acknowledge the love we have of our home range and thus pay little attention to the influence it has on our lives. I believe outdoor education can play a role in awakening interest in the detail, not by climbing imposing mountains, or running wild rivers, but by taking time to look at the detail of a place, the relation between plants and soil, slope, aspect, between plants and animals, between plants, animals and ourselves. This is not scientific ecology but merely observing, participating, taking an interest, or being shown some detail of a place. Most of my richest moments in the bush have been observing the simple, yet magical, things. Seeing a Sittella (a treecreeper) hanging upside down from a branch hop effortlessly upward in search of small insects under the bark, feeling anxious as a Tiger snake swims across the river in front of me, or being transfixed by an eel suspended in mid-current of a river suddenly explode into action upon seeing something to eat. It is the fine detail of life which give our own existence texture and meaning. Discovering this detail is vitally important to rediscovering that our homes are important places and desperately need our love, respect and attention.

In a time when our pace of life is very hectic, outdoor education, albeit my understanding of it, slows participants down to what I would like to think of as a more ‘natural’ pace, one that we should strive to live by. Wendell Berry (1990, p. 766-767) makes the insightful observation that

We seem to grant to our high-speed roads and our airlines the rather thoughtless assumption that people can change places as rapidly as their bodies can be transported. That, as my own experience keeps proving to me, is not true…The faster one goes, the more strain there is on the senses, the more they fail to take in, the more confusion they must tolerate or gloss over—and the longer it takes to bring the mind to a stop in the presence of anything.

At a slower pace it is possible to “become vulnerable to a place” (Lopez 1996, p. 11), to open up and begin a dialogue with place, not simply a monologue of our doings but a dialogue between ourselves and the elements of place. This dialogue is found in the observing and participating in the life of a place. Seeing the Honeyeater drink nectar, feeling the water, tasting the air after rain, sleeping on the ground, knowing where to find water and where it is safe to camp. We do not just visit a place, a landscape, we participate in it, we become part of its life, its story.

Nature writers such as Lopez (1996, p. 12) provide further understanding

A succinct way to describe the frame of mind one should bring to a landscape is to say it rests on the distinction between imposing and proposing one’s views. With a sincere proposal you hope to achieve an intimate, reciprocal relationship that will feed you in some way. To impose your views from the start is to truncate such as possibility, to preclude understanding.

I am under no illusion. When we go into the bush we take with us an incredible array of cultural baggage. Yet I know, through my own experience, that going bush in some way lightens that baggage, makes it less obvious and imposing: “In growing used to being in this place, I will have to accept a humbler and truer view of myself than I usually have”
It is in this light, slightly freer of our imposing culture, that I feel it is possible to open to the voices of the bush, to begin a dialogue with a place. Free of the clutter of our everyday life we can begin to open our senses, our heart and our mind, as if for the first time. To see the detail and know there is more to life, that there are places, our places, which are just as important as the other aspects of our lives, and that they are not merely a backdrop but are integral to who we are and what we represent.

Returning again to Lopez (1996, p. 12), he writes, referring to good relations with a particular stretch of land:

It may be more important to human survival now to be in love than to be in a position of power. It may be more important now to enter into an ethical and reciprocal relationship with everything around us than to continue to work toward the sort of control of the physical world that, until recently, we aspired to.

Alan Gussow (1991) commented:

I think minds are best changed through experience, through direct personal, hands-on contact. Information alone rarely changes minds. There is a deeper kind of knowledge, knowledge gained through risk and commitment, a knowledge acquired through working with neighbours, by working with tools, a knowledge gained through apprenticeship.

It is through lived experience, such as those outdoor education can provide, that we can begin the process of reconnecting with the land, our places. Our moral understanding of the natural world is grounded in our previous experiences with the natural landscape. In fact they feed into each other. I therefore believe that outdoor education can contribute toward a positive moral understanding of the natural environment, and thus help form better relationships with place. To do so, however, it is important that we do not visit places as merely tourists, or onlookers, but immerse ourselves in the place, become involved in the life of the place and be a member of the community.

**Conclusion**

Returning to the bush, where we began this journey, I slow my pace, observe, listen patiently, trying hard to discern the stories of those around me…there are many to take in. Outdoor education that provides lived experiences which engage with a space can transform it into a place full of life and history. Although I feel outdoor education can never hope to become fully rooted as Edward Relph describes, it does, nonetheless, have a role to play in awaking participants to the joys, magic and importance of places outdoors. Yet giving place a voice in outdoor education experiences needs to be conscious and explicit if it is to open dialogue between people and their environment, build understanding, facilitate relationships, and ultimately, develop a sense of place.

Using outdoor education to connect people with place is challenging. It presents many questions such as the mode of engagement, the meaning made of experience and the consequences for other aspects of ones life. While not readily resolved these issues do not become easier through avoidance; care and attention to detail is needed in building experiences that connect people with place. Outdoor education has a great opportunity to
show participants how to transform spaces into place, to connect people with places, particularly our local places. Through such experience people may begin to learn that their places are important and deserving of their attention. Outdoor education can provide a valid medium to reinvigorate our love of our home range, inspire us to seek out healthy connections with our home place, and ultimately, I hope, lead to an understanding and humble acceptance that we are but a small component of the places we live within.

References
Acknowledgements
An earlier version of this paper appeared in Journeys: Newsjournal of the VOEA, volume 3, number 4, August 1998. Permission has been granted to publish a revised version.

The author would like to thank Kathleen Pleasants, Almut Beringer and the reviewers for their invaluable feedback on various drafts of this paper.