

Connection and Consequence in Outdoor Education

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Abstract

There is a pressing need for all of us to appreciate the environmental consequences of our actions. In this paper I argue for outdoor education programmes which encourage this understanding. The process is informed by an appreciation of the power of outdoor educational experiences to stimulate physical, intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual development. Recognition of our spiritual involvement with the landscape and the impact of this on values and hence environmental concern is a key theme. A practical approach to these issues is given in a companion paper (Higgins, 1996).

Introduction

'The human heart, as history proves, I believe, can endure anything except a state of meaninglessness. Without meaning it dies like a fish without water on the sands of a wasteland beach'. (Laurens van der Post, 1978.)

This paper contains a number of personal views and reminiscences which are used to give substance to various points. I frequently refer to myself in the first person rather than the academically more conventional third person. There are a number of reasons for this approach though the prime motivation is as follows:-

I was there; these things happened to me and roused certain emotions;

I am different as a result.

I learnt various things from these experiences which I hope to communicate.

The sense of I is a crucial quality in the development of all individuals, without it we can have no understanding of the concepts of connection and consequence.

I recently heard Edward Lorenz, considered to be one of the originators of 'Chaos Theory', talking on the radio. He explained the ideas behind the theory, which expresses the notion of randomness in many physical, natural and societal phenomena through the example of a sheet of paper falling to the floor when released from the hand. (See Gleick, 1988 for a readable account of Chaos Theory). Intuitively we understand the concept following this example; we realise that we have no way of predicting the path of the paper sheet on its way to the floor. It seems to me that we have here a good analogy for the way in which an individual develops. We know about the start and the end, but there are so many influences on the path throughout life which cannot be described. Even the individual concerned will have precious little idea of the major influences on his or her life. If we, as outdoor educators are quick, we may catch the paper for a moment. We

must then release it and allow it to continue on its journey. So, how do we think we can have much effect on this essentially chaotic process in an outdoor educational experience ?

Common sense would tell us that for many individuals we can expect to have a relatively small influence. Whilst many would argue that outdoor education can sometimes provide 'life changing experiences', most would agree that we can expect to do relatively little over the short time scale of many outdoor experiences and we should therefore make some choices. There are many pressing problems facing society today. Consequently I believe we should concentrate on the aspects of the development of our students which have a bearing on their future self and environmental awareness.

In the paragraph above I have avoided the use of the term 'client'. In the context of educational experiences I feel that the term is inappropriate as it gives precisely the kind of impression of consumerism and financial transaction which I believe embodies much of what is wrong with our education system. The term 'student' often implies an imparting of knowledge and I am not comfortable with this term in the context of outdoor education. It may not be appropriate for all the groups one may have in mind but at least I don't have the feeling that I am selling my soul when I use it.

For convenience I will consider 'young people' as I feel that for the purposes of this argument there is value in concentrating on this sector of our society. This is because I believe that they have most to lose from a failure to understand their connection to the Earth and the societal and environmental consequences of their actions. That is not to say that there is no point in applying these principles to other groups; far from it. However, young people are frequently the recipients of our courses and are often amenable to the outdoor experience. According to the much quoted sentiment that 'we do not inherit the Earth from our parents, we borrow it

from our children' they also have the most to lose from such a lack of connection.

I intend also to focus on the 'Western' world rather than the 'East', the 'North' rather than the 'South'. I also reject the use of the terms 'Developed' and 'Developing' World as these imply respectively that 'we have got there' and that 'they are getting there' ! I can't really say that I know where 'there' is nor even if I want to be there. There are a number of other reasons for this attitude, though at the core is my profound belief that the West / North has by far the greatest impact on the environment of our planet. Damning statistical indictments in support of this view can be found in the work of any number of well respected environmental campaigners, government reports etc. I will refer the reader to just two. David Suzuki's impassioned speeches are better heard than read (Suzuki, 1994), whilst The Brandt Commission Report (which was one of the catalysts for the Rio Summit in 1992) adds substantial weight to the debate, coming as it does as an independent enquiry into the 'North South Divide' (Brandt Commission, 1980). So, I feel that we have much to gain by positive action and much to lose by inaction. Furthermore, we in the North / West have the luxury of time to devote to education (indoor or outdoor), recreation (or re-creation), reflection and philosophy. A commodity not readily available in the rest of the world ! ('Leisure is the mother of philosophy' (Hobbes) and 'the daughter of wealth' (Dodge, 1996))

Characteristics of a 'Disconnected' Person

Let us have a look at a portrait of a disconnected young person. The statistics vary a bit from region to region, country to country, however we do not need to refer to them to equip ourselves with a thumbnail sketch. However as we do so let us not forget that we were not so different ourselves as youngsters and will likely exhibit many of these characteristics as adults.

The majority of these young people have little concept of the lower orders of 'Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs' (Maslow, 1970) as their physiological needs are well met and they are sheltered, warm and well fed. Water comes out of the taps, food from the freezer or the fast food provider, warmth and light at the flick of a switch. For many there is never a need for any kind of a struggle to obtain any of these things. Very few even walk to school and it is important to avoid breaking into a sweat for any reason whatsoever; image is of critical importance. The majority are carnivores but many have rarely if ever seen a chicken or a pig. Furthermore, most would be horrified at the sight of one of these food items being killed and prepared for eating. Electricity is of course taken for granted, even though without it the majority of the electric and electronic gadgets essential for play would be useless. If something goes wrong with any item around the home there is little likelihood that anyone in the household would be able to fix it; a specialist or the dump are the only realistic options.

There is a downside to a modern disconnected life. With an increasing divorce rate and higher mobility, the traditional concept of 'family' is becoming less common. Many young people feel a sense of futility when asked to contemplate their prospects of influencing the world around them. Few view the prospect of exercising their democratic rights through voting in elections with any interest. (The example provided by the electorate is hardly

inspiring; as I write in January 1996 I have just heard (BBC Radio 4) that 9 out of 10 adults have just bought a National Lottery ticket, as compared with 76% who voted in the last General Election). Although many young people are aware of environmental issues, there is a similar feeling of impotence. The advertising machine and the image makers have never been more influential and much of a young person's experience is delivered by the television and other media. There are dreams to be sold and vested interests to be supported. There is so much 'noise' that the young person is 'deafened' by information and influence. It comes as little surprise then that so few young people have much experience of exercising judgment and making decisions.

City life seems to exaggerate the tendency towards disconnection. This has been a popular theme amongst sociologists for many years with warnings being voiced since the early '70s (Toffler, 1973; Morgan, 1978). Many cities are now experiencing an exodus of the population into the outskirts, encouraging residential and business development in green belt areas and depopulated urban centres. This results in an increase in commuter traffic and attendant serious environmental and social consequences. In some of the world's major cities the time spent in commuter traffic jams is now so substantial that innovative approaches are required to deal with very natural functions. Apparently, sales of the 'Comfort 2000' (an in-car personal toilet) are booming in Bangkok (BBC Radio 4, Costing The Earth, 20 March 1996). This may be pragmatic; it may relieve an immediate problem but it clearly does not address the underlying issue.

Time for a word of warning. Whilst I believe the above description to be representative of the majority there are an increasing number of young people who experience relatively few of the 'advantages' but most of the disadvantages of the modern world. I believe they are the product of the very shift towards the disconnected world considered in this paper. The truth is that although this is not a truly modern phenomenon, we would do well to consider the circumstances which produced them. Their future is even more precarious than that of the 'privileged' young people I describe above.

Characteristics of a 'More Connected' Person

To give a description of the young person I have in mind in this section is not an easy matter as I do not wish to set him or her in a time or place. Similarly I wish to avoid the temptation to glamorise aspects of this life style. This 'compound' person does however have certain characteristics with which many will identify. In simple terms these are some form of involvement with the land, the weather and the seasons, a less complex life style and an understanding, based on practical experience, of cause and effect.

This young person will have spent some time in and around agricultural settings and will have a good idea of what it means to be a carnivore. At the appropriate time of year he or she will eat fresh fruit and vegetables which will be collected or grown in a family garden. Waste organic matter will be composted and used to grow more food. Warmth would not be taken for granted as fuel of one form or another would have to be fetched and used carefully. This will be just one of the physical tasks young people will be accustomed to on a daily basis. Water may well come out of a tap,

but the older folk within the community will still not take it for granted. Few people move in and out of the community and the majority of people have an extended family to relate to. There is a strong feeling of community and mutual help is the norm. When equipment goes wrong the first step is to see what you can do about it yourself before you look to the broader community for assistance.

The first taste of any given fruit or vegetable of the season is looked forward to and relished. The impact of severe weather on growth, collection and harvesting of foodstuffs is keenly felt. Wastage, especially of food is rare and frowned upon. There are no 'sell-by' dates to be adhered to. When an animal (wild or farmed) is killed for food, almost all of it is used in one way or another. (See the account in Nelson, 1986 of the uses of and taboos associated with the carcass of a brown bear in Koyukon society (Alaska)).

Young people of the community take their share of responsibilities, and these increase with maturity. There is a sense of a development from childhood to adulthood and an acceptance of this amongst adults. Older members of the community, with whom young people have daily contact, are respected for their experience and wisdom and are referred to in decision making processes.

Most readers will, I'm sure, be reflecting upon the society they were raised in and be setting this compound young person in a past time and place. However, reflection on the traditional Russian saying that 'the past is unpredictable', should encourage us to avoid the tendency to romanticise this lifestyle. I could not have built up this picture without referring to my own upbringing but I have found the work of a number of writers who may be considered to be 'popular anthropologists' to be most instructive. I don't wish to give a 'reading list' but I have been strongly influenced by, amongst others, the work of Laurens van der Post (Bushmen and other African native peoples), Bruce Chatwin (primarily Australian Aborigine), Nelson (Native Alaskan) and Hugh Brody (Native American, North American Arctic races, rural Irish). I have given details of at least one title by each in a bibliography.

Deeper Connections

It is all too easy to assume that life was somehow better for the young person leading the more 'natural' life described here. Before we romanticise it too much, we might reflect on the 'down-side': a life of hard work which allowed precious little leisure time, and which was unpredictable and on average shorter. I am however sure that given a free choice most young people would prefer the more 'modern' lifestyle. My view is that whilst there have been undoubted gains as society shifts away from involvement with the outdoors and there have also been losses. It seems to me that there are a number of practical reasons for addressing this issue, and asking what outdoor education can do to compensate. However, besides the practical imperative I feel that there are issues of substance which relate to spiritual wellbeing.

I know I feel less well if I am removed from direct experience of the outdoors. I need to feel wind and rain on my face and to be aware of my body moving through the landscape. This can be by any form of transport as long as I have for at least part of the time to use some of my muscles and become aware of my breathing. I

need to see, hear, smell, taste and touch natural objects. At times I need to be alone. At others I feel the need for company.

If I am unable, for whatever reason, to experience the natural world directly I need to find some spiritual first aid. I have, from a personal perspective long been aware of the power of aesthetic experiences. I am often deeply affected by prose, poetry, art and music, especially when these relate to some aspect of the land and man's situation within it. One of the aspects of this which I am frequently astonished by is its timeless nature. I intend to avoid too many examples as I am sure that the reader will have a number which spring to mind. However, some of my experiences have been drawn from as wide a range as, traditional Irish and Scottish music, Aborigine, Bushmen and Maori legends, modern poetry, 'Earth art' etc.

The means by which such experiences 'speak' to us has of course long been an issue for debate amongst philosophers and psychologists. In some sense it is perhaps enough to acknowledge that they do. However, the work of Jung is for myself so persuasive that I must mention it here. Jung felt that, far from society 'progressing' away from the 'primitive', an understanding of the behaviour of modern man and society could only be achieved through acknowledgement of these influences. In Jungian terms we all have a reservoir of images or 'memories' deep in our unconscious which relate to ancestral experiences. Central to the notion is the idea that although these are not experiences of our own time and life they do have bearing on the way individuals and society behave. Phipps (1985) in an eloquent summary of what Jung can have to say to us as outdoor educators, suggests that we can understand some of the draw of wild places as 'our need for survival in the modern world is gone in the original sense but is still there in our unconscious'. Jung considered an evolutionary aspect to the development of the collective unconscious, and perhaps there is a lag between this and the increasingly rapid rate at which cognitive development is demanded in modern society.

Can we derive a deeper understanding through Jung's division of the psyche into the conscious and the unconscious? I believe that the direct personal experiences we have of the outdoors may have an impact on other dimensions of the psyche. Aspects of these experiences are of course lodged in the current individual consciousness, whilst others will find their way into the personal unconscious. Both can serve to reinforce the innate feelings of the deep collective unconscious. Reinforcement through direct experience is 'our business' and something we as outdoor educators can expect to do something about.

In one of the earliest and still most powerful essays on the potential of education out of doors, Drasdo (1972) argued that 'the one aesthetic experience significant to all men through all time is that of our affair with the landscape. It does not depend on intelligence or literacy...'. He appealed for 'a comprehensive view of landscape's types of action on man or, more properly, of his responses to landscape'. His appeal has now been heard. In a wide ranging book charting the history of our spiritual involvement with the landscape, Schama (1995) comes down heavily in favour of developing our understanding of human perception and environment simultaneously. It is impossible to summarise this book in a few lines, however I found that it reinforced my belief that 'before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Scenery is built up as much from strata of

memory as from layers of rock' (Schama, 1995). This should give us confidence that we have an important role to play in education. Van der Post (1987) argues that 'educating man through nature..(is)..the most valuable and urgent form of education that modern man needs'; and that preserving and creating new schools of wilderness is of pressing importance.

How does this help us in the search for connection and consequence? I feel emotionally and spiritually connected to the Earth. By that I do not mean to imply any religious belief although for many this is the form it takes. I feel better as a result of this connection and am confident enough in the benefits of this experience for myself to wish to do what I can to encourage others to experience this for themselves. Sounds a bit like environmental fundamentalism doesn't it? Well that's OK by me as I believe that there are potential practical outcomes to this approach. I am not simply looking forward to few words of praise in Heaven as my eventual reward. The outdoor experience is of itself a powerful and eloquent ally in the process of education for environmental connection and consequence. There are great potential benefits in self awareness and environmental rehabilitation.

Connections between Action and Consequence

Earlier I described typical connected and disconnected lifestyles. I am inclined to argue that a lifestyle within which one is isolated from the consequences of one's actions is less natural, and in the long term is not sustainable. (In the companion article to this (Higgins, 1996) I elaborate on the meaning and limitations of this term in an outdoor education context). For almost every action taken by someone in the North / Western world there is an environmental consequence although what this may be is often not at all easy to discover. If we stop to consider the relative (non-financial) cost of using a disposable cup or one which will be washed in detergent we will certainly be more thirsty by the time we get our drink! The costs of water from our taps, electricity or gas supply are even more bewildering, let alone the processes by which mangoes are available in our supermarkets. The straightforward truth of the matter is that the environmental costs of these processes are hidden. Either because the polluter doesn't pay for the clean-up, or because no clean-up is done. As the only way we seem to measure cost in the modern world is financial there is no connection between these two types of cost and little or no consequence for the producer or user.

To plead bewilderment is little excuse for inaction on the part of individuals and no excuse for educators. Although we may not know what the consequences of our actions are, we do have a suspicion that there are consequences. Little voices tell us, and as we are inclined to find them disconcerting we 'put our fingers' in our ears. Many of us have made a start in our own lives by for example, recycling paper, glass and metal. There are periodic suggestions that this is futile because it is cheaper for manufacturers to buy new than recycle old. This is not a valid argument as the presupposition of the short term economic imperative is environmentally flawed. There are arguments surrounding the environmental costs too and some of these are complex. Whilst these are interesting in their own right an extended discussion is not pertinent here. My point is that although recycling may be largely symbolic at present it does give those who do so a feeling

of satisfaction through doing something. There are some reports of a decline in interest in recycling at present. If this is true (or even if it isn't) it seems worthwhile to give individuals a positive feeling about what they are doing. Very few will have seen the process in action or will have much of an idea of relative environmental or financial costs. I believe it is appropriate within our programmes to endeavour to do something by example, and to illustrate wherever possible the links between action and consequence.

Young people are often 'smarter' and more observant than we give them credit for. They know when our actions belie our words. If we don't take this process seriously and make them aware that we are aware ourselves that there are consequences to our actions and act accordingly, they will spot the inconsistency and will be less inclined to take the message on board. (The importance of consistency and integrity in educators is described by Titman, 1995). In a practical sense this means doing what we can in our centre or school to reduce environmental impact. The consequences of leaving lights or heating on when not necessary are higher bills (no problem as far as the planet is concerned) and a number of environmental costs, not the least of which is atmospheric pollution and global warming.

Re-Creation

'As we get more and more experience we find the only way forward is not through groups but through individuals, so our whole aim is to re-create or re-educate, individuals through nature to see life from nature's point of view..' Laurens van der Post (1987) discussing the work of the World Wilderness Foundation.

What do I mean by this very deliberate term? There is an assumption that there is something here to begin with, and indeed I believe there is. Whilst there is general agreement with the terminology for the functions of the psyche as physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual (see Phipps, 1985), the use of the term 'creation' here is intended to refer to the spiritual aspect of the collective unconscious described earlier. This is there at the beginning for all of us, and Phipps (1985) describes it as 'the anchor securing us to life'.

I recently came across another author who had made deliberate use of the term 're-creation'. Devall (1990) draws together a number of thoughts on the shallow approach to the outdoors taken by those recreating in it. He brings attention to the shift away from the vision of those such as Muir and Nansen who saw outdoor recreation as the opportunity to rediscover our connection with the land, our primal senses and spirit. Modern outdoor recreation is increasingly image conscious, gear intensive, regulated and environmentally harmful. I do not intend to explore the environmental consequences of every outdoor activity from a gentle walk in the countryside to off road vehicle use. For some the inherent impact is greater, for others it may simply be the pressure of numbers.

For me the process of re-creation is one of rediscovering what is there but has become hidden under the debris of modern living. Outdoor recreation brings me feelings of joy, self worth and increased confidence. My spiritual nature is somehow reinvigorated and I am again aware of feelings of beauty and love of the landscape. Above all I feel that my spirit is refreshed and I can feel the

connection with the land. Some of the terminology here may cause some readers to feel a little uncomfortable, although it is my guess that there will be few who could not find their own way of describing the same sort of process.

The outdoors offers us an opportunity to reconnect and relate to the very senses which I believe stood us in good stead throughout our evolution as a species. These senses should, if anything, be more vital now to face the environmental problems which lie ahead. My sadness is that the simple messages of connection and consequence, available to us through respectful experiences of the outdoors will be lost in the wilderness theme park.

Conclusion

A couple of summers ago I was in Alaska. I have been fortunate enough to have been a fairly frequent visitor and on this occasion I had spent some time with a biologist friend in Glacier Bay. We were walking along the quay in Juneau past one of the cruise ships which are now as common in those waters as the humpback whales many come to see. Through the portholes of the cabins we could see televisions all identically mounted on the walls and showing the same picture. Nothing surprising in that I suppose. However, the realisation finally dawned that the image on the screen was that of the quay, and that the purpose of the TV was to screen closed circuit images of the wonders of Glacier Bay without the inconvenience of the cold, the wind or the rain. I confess that the spectre of this 'virtual' world does bother me. The paradox of the people who are obviously interested and care enough to make this expensive trip of a lifetime, and yet are insulated from a direct experience of the world they have come to see convinces me that we have an important role.

Closer to home, the Cairngorm Chairlift Company (Grampian Mountains, Scotland) have sought planning permission to build a funicular railway to just below the summit of Cairngorm. Visitors would be 'managed' and unless prepared to pay for a ranger guided walk would be kept in the visitor centre (this would include any properly equipped hillwalkers, climbers and birdwatchers!). The 'leakage' of those who came up but did not return by the funicular would be monitored (Cairngorm Chairlift Company spokesperson, 5 March 1996). The image of visitors travelling in a funicular bubble of air to a temperature controlled environment on top of a mountain concerns me. It surely makes our role as educators even more vital as we clearly need to point out that being in a glass walled visitor centre is nothing to do with being on a mountain.

We must help people to experience directly and to become aware of their practical and spiritual connections to the 'natural' world.

I am not against outdoor activities, nor am I against the idea of adventure. Far from it. My own first love of the outdoors came from uncomplicated forays into the hills, onto rivers or the sea, and this love exists to this day. Without activities such as these we have a hard task to capture the student's interest and sustain enthusiasm. We have to have a love for the place (whether it be an old quarry with a few rock climbs, or the planet itself!) first, before we will take an interest in caring for it. Activities such as climbing and canoeing are valuable experiences in their own right and do not always have to lead the participant on to some deeper awareness. In some cases this may come later, in others it may not. I am

however arguing that because many of us as outdoor educators do care and we carry the title 'educator', we should endeavour to guide our students in directions other than just enjoying the activity alone.

It is my passionate belief that in general terms education should lead us to greater awareness. Mortlock (1984) stated the role of outdoor education clearly when he suggested that we should endeavour to educate for an increased love and awareness of self, others and environment. The term 'deep ecology' has been around since 1972 and should be attributed to Arne Naess. Its principles are well articulated by an increasing number and range of authors. I have found Naess' (1986) lecture on the subject to be illuminating and have empathy with the definition offered by Devall (1990) who suggests that 'it refers to finding our bearings, to the process of grounding ourselves through fuller experience of our connection to the Earth.' He cites Naess as elaborating on the term 'deep' as 'explication of fundamental presuppositions of valuation as well as of facts and hypotheses' (Naess in Tobias, 1985).

Roger (1993) advocates 'awareness' as a key value in environmental education. He suggests we should view this in the context of 'humans as users, managers, protectors, admirers and respecters of the environment'. He points out that only the last of these is untainted by 'what we can get from it'. Some outdoor educators may do all of these but the focus has traditionally been on use (outdoor activities) and admiration (aesthetics, etc). We may increasingly endeavour to manage or protect areas we use but there is an implicit selfish motive. I feel we should be seeking ways of encouraging respect through increasing awareness.

Through this awareness we have a feeling of who we are and our place as organisms who have the power to make our own decisions. To what degree these decisions have a positive, neutral or negative effect on ourselves, others and the wider environment, we will often not know. However, through appropriately focused education, with an outdoor education experience playing a vital part, we can I believe encourage the desire to understand the consequences of our actions. We are then well placed to make choices about how we behave and what we decide.

The idea that we should have some control over our lives seems on the face of it to be obvious. However, the education systems I am familiar with in the Western world do not seem to make this a focal point. Mary Warnock (1993) argues a strong case for the focus of school education being on 'power' and 'pleasure'. She is not suggesting that through this process we will raise megalomaniac hedonists. Rather, by power she is suggesting that children, like ourselves take pleasure in 'the ability to control, understand, and act on our environment, whatever that may be, to order it and not be overwhelmed by it'. It is crucial that we educate to make our charges aware that there are choices to be made.

In a companion paper (Higgins, 1996) I give examples of an approach to making these connections through an 'elemental' outdoor education programme. Outdoor educators have great opportunities to explore themes such as land, air, water and fire and develop a real and practical understanding of environmental connections and consequences. These themes and others are explored, and exemplars given.

'If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.' (Thoreau, 1854).

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