

**A Sense of Place:
A Context for Environmental Outdoor Education**

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Three traditional approaches to environmental education within outdoor education are explored. These are acknowledged as having great value but it is argued that outdoor education can make an additional and special contribution through the development of a 'sense of place'.

Three 'Traditions' of Environmental Education in Outdoor Education

Within the United Kingdom outdoor profession we tend to view environmental education as a subject area within outdoor education (although specialist environmental educators would not see it this way). As such environmental education has come to be defined in relation to, and arising out of, what has been delivered within a programme of outdoor education. Environmental education therefore has a specific meaning, or range of meanings, when discussed in relation to outdoor education. Looking closely at these meanings three broad areas emerge as representative of what environmental education has come to mean for outdoor education.

The Aesthetic Tradition

Of all the activity disciplines outdoor education draws upon the literature of mountaineering (including by association polar exploration) contains perhaps the richest prose¹. This tradition probably owes much to adventure, exploration and heightened awareness intrinsic to the experience itself, not to mention the vicarious appetite of many an armchair mountaineer. One need look no further than the carefully crafted names and guidebook descriptions given to routes (we will all have our own personal favourites) by those who are simply completing the creative act of finding and climbing them in the first place. The quality of the literature is now fully

acknowledged through awards (such as the Boardman/Tasker literary prize), anthologies, an 'Outdoor Writers Guild' and a growing appreciation amongst an increasingly diverse 'lay audience'.

Whilst the rationale behind mountaineering was that of a recreational pursuit, some mountaineers who came to work in outdoor education brought with them a particular, and special relationship linking self, activity and the environment. Indeed, the pursuit of outdoor activities as a means of self-realisation has been a constant theme in the literature. It is this relationship which forms the first historical strand of environmental education which we would like to call 'The Aesthetic Tradition'. One of the earliest and most eloquent representatives of this tradition in outdoor education was Harold Drasdo. Drasdo's experiential involvement as a climber provided him with a feeling for the activity to which he felt the goals of outdoor education should be directed. In what must now be seen as a pioneering book on 'Education and the Mountain Centres' Drasdo (1973: 16) suggests 'the climber's lonely dance is infinitely expressive. The cliff writes the choreography, the weather reinterprets it, the climber reveals himself through it in his own performance'. This sentiment will strike a chord in all climbers remembering their own moments of oneness where a collection of movements became a unity of physical and mental experience, where the climb becomes more of a flow of graceful movements than a series of physical exertions.

In the spirit of constructive criticism we would like to challenge the educational value arising from this tradition. If fault is to be found with this approach it is certainly not to do with its appeal nor value but perhaps more to do with how an outdoor educator creates opportunities

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for their students to have such an experience. Its appeal is existential, that is to say, the individual who has enjoyed those experiences that Drasdo talks of will instantly relate to this relationship between self, activity and the environment but at a personal level. Colin Mortlock has, in his own way expressed similar existential tendencies. His (1984: 58) use of Schopenhauer's phrase 'Know thyself and know the world' goes to the very heart of a personal philosophy whereby enlightenment begins with knowledge of self. Perhaps the most telling aspect of Mortlock's (1984: 4) philosophy is expressed in his description of the 'inner journey' which appears at once both metaphorical and literal: 'Your success is determined by your efforts and not by your results, and you may come to realise that the most important journey is the journey inwards'.

The existential ideal expressed by both Mortlock and Drasdo poses certain problems for the outdoor educator. It is not something a teacher can teach so much as something that the pupil can experience; even then the teacher has no way of knowing quite what the pupil has experienced. From an existential perspective this does not matter. However, stand forward all those who feel they could develop a watertight case for outdoor education on an existential basis. It is our view that the aesthetic approach, as described here, can have profound influences on teachers and pupils alike though it does not lend itself well to teaching, facilitating nor description. There is a sense of randomness about such experiences but the more one engages in (say) mountaineering the more chance there is of having these aesthetic experiences. Outdoor educators can design and try to orchestrate such experiences, and successes may lead to memories which last a lifetime. However, as such experiences are essentially both random and ephemeral, success cannot be guaranteed. In summary therefore, the existential ideal is just that, an ideal, something for teachers to aim towards, always a process but never an outcome.

The Field Studies Tradition

Unlike the experiential aspect of the aesthetic tradition the Field Studies approach differs in that there is a tangible body of knowledge which can be taught in a conventional sense. Many outdoor centres have field studies laboratories and provide for both curricular and informal education. Although experiential and active components play some part in this tradition it is largely dependent on understanding associated with a theoretical perspective. Although much of the work of outdoor education depends on experiential learning it would be a mistake to underestimate the significance of theoretical perspectives. Hopkins and Putnam (1993: 11) describe John Dewey as the 'high priest of experiential learning' and it was Dewey himself who believed in the unity of theory and practice (Dewey, 1963).

We would claim therefore that the field studies tradition is an essential part of environmental education and that understanding of the environment from a theoretical sense is, and should remain, a high priority. If justification is necessary to support this claim one need look no further than the criticism of environmental education by the Institute of Economic Affairs (Moodie and Kwong, 1997). In a recent publication (1997: 94) they have ridiculed the environmental movement for its 'emotionalism, hype and misinformation'. One need look no further than the controversy over the Brent Spar where Greenpeace insisted that the best way of handling the decommissioning of the rig was to have it towed ashore and dismantled. Shell, on the other hand argued that to sink it was the 'best' method. Greenpeace 'won' the debate in that they succeeded in having the rig towed ashore. However, subsequent evidence showed that the debate was poorly informed in relation to the true environmental costs of decommissioning, and the argument was based more on the effectiveness of the 'publicity campaigns' than on reason. We are not suggesting that our purpose in environmental education should be to encourage

involvement in environmental organisations, rather than we should promote an openness on all sides to the facts surrounding environmental issues. Good science should therefore be a prerequisite of environmental education, and the field studies approach promotes this. An understanding of ecosystems is the central theme of the field studies tradition and Capra (1997: 290) reasons that although 'there are many differences between ecosystems and human communities'.... 'we can learn from them how to live sustainably'. As Capra continues to reason, over 3 billion years of evolution offers evidence of such success!

However, Cooper (1996) offers some caveats warning that environmental education which focuses only on the theoretical (simply acquiring knowledge) may be at the expense of other necessary understandings. He distinguishes firstly between environmental (field) studies and environmental education. His (1996: 8) definition suggests that 'whereas the former is concerned with learning *about* (knowledge) and *through* the environment (skills), the latter emphasises learning *for* the environment and is therefore particularly concerned with attitudes, values and action' (our italics). We would suggest that the field studies approach is sufficiently embedded within the practice of outdoor education to be recognised as a tradition. The same cannot yet be said of the more expansive view of environmental education that Cooper suggests, however, it is a view that is central to this paper and one to which we will return.

Sensitisation - A More Recent Approach

The third area of environmental education which has literature support is that of the 'sensitisation' packages pioneered by practitioners such as Steve Van Matre (eg 1972, 1975) and Joseph Cornell (eg 1989), adopted and adapted by many others (eg Cooper). Through sensory approaches (primarily applied through direct experience in the outdoors) these teaching methods are

devised to evoke an emotional response from participants who take part in the activities. The attraction of the such approaches to environmental education is that they usually employ ready prepared resources and are specifically designed to be fun, lively or reflective. They are particularly attractive since they can be adopted into outdoor education programmes by instructors without a science background and are often adopted without a high degree of staff training. (Some would however argue that this presents a hazard as instructor understanding may be superficial). Some educators feel that they present useful resources to be drawn on partially without necessarily using the package as an entity. However this is discouraged by Van Matre and his supporters who insist on training and the use of complete packages.

It should be noted that the production of resource packages for environmental education has now become increasingly popular with many conservation agencies, as well as those with educational interests, producing a wide diversity of well produced resources and teaching aids. Agencies such as Scottish Natural Heritage, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and The World Wide Fund for Nature Conservation come to mind.*

It should be noted that the majority of these approaches were devised in North America, initially with young people in mind and in a warm climate. This has led to some questioning of the approach, as has the fact that some of the resources employed are very specific to the activity and therefore require careful preparation. Nonetheless, and for the variety of reasons identified they are an increasingly popular form of environmental education in outdoor centres.

A Sense of Place

Thus far we have suggested that the meaning and significance of environmental education within outdoor education can be categorised within the

three broad traditions of the aesthetic, field studies and sensitisation approaches. Like Cooper, however, we believe in a more expansive view of environmental education. It is a view inspired by authors such as John Muir (1992), Aldo Leopold (1968) and Henry David Thoreau (1983), all activists and outdoors people alike. It is also a view which finds modern interpretations in the work of, amongst others, James Hunter (1995), Christopher Smout (undated), Simon Schama (1995) and David Craig (1987). (These references provide a sample bibliography). Pioneering work of organisations such as the Scottish Environmental Education Council (SEEC) in this area is reflected in publications of international importance such as 'Learning for Living' (1985), 'Learning for Life' (1993) and 'Learning to Sustain' (1998). The common denominator linking these authors and is the relationship of human beings with the land. This is also the focus of arguments recently put forward within outdoor education by amongst others Higgins (1996, 1997) and White (1998) who argue that direct involvement with the landscape and awareness of cultural tradition and diversity represent an important focus for outdoor education. This is an increasing feature of our own work and research interest. This denominator (a sense of place), adds a fourth category to those described earlier.

The origins of the concept of place are to be found in humanistic geography and Meinig (1979: 3) suggests that 'place commonly refers to a definite area, a fixed location; events "take place" and we can be in a place'. Implicit within this idea is that one can feel a personal attachment to place. This concept is elaborated beautifully by Schama (1995) who traces historical, cultural and geographical perspectives. As outdoor educators we spend a lot of time outdoors and our sense of, and attachment to, place may cause us to reflect on what this attachment is. Neglect of the cultural history of a landscape by outdoor educators is a criticism levelled by White (1998), who makes particular reference to

what is lost through ignorance of as rich a landscape as that of Scotland. White draws upon the work of important commentators such as Hunter (1995) to make specific mention of the Highland Clearances, their cultural significance and their deep impact on contemporary Scottish psyche. These are themes we also elaborate elsewhere (Nicol and Higgins, 1998).

A 'sense of place' implies that the outdoor educator be in tune, at a personal level, with those social and environmental actions, both past and present, which have influenced the landscape over which they pass. There is also educational value in understanding the concept of space found in Relph's (1976: 1) recognition that 'a knowledge of places is an indispensable link in the chain of knowledge'.

In a wide ranging review and research project on the value of school grounds, Titman (1994: 8) states that the 'relationship between place-identity and self-identity holds considerable significance in terms of children's environmental experience'. She points to the 'development of a sense of ownership and belonging', noting that the concept of ownership is 'not necessary literal', but rather that such places are 'for me' or 'people like me'. Thus a sense of place is above all about identity. In outdoor education we have not developed this identity in relation to the places that we use to pursue our educational ideal. The outdoor literature in the United Kingdom is conspicuous by the absence of any treatment of this relationship.

Concluding Comments

Whilst there appear to be three 'traditions' of environmental education in outdoor education this may disguise a variety of individual approaches. We need not confine ourselves to these three, nor indeed to the additional approach we suggest. Environmental education is developing successfully and quite independently of outdoor education, and an eclectic approach is taken by

leading organisations such as SEEC.

There is of course an understanding that environmental education does, in the final analysis strive for awareness and self-confidence in each individual that he/she should consider issues fully and develop values accordingly. 'Values education' is a developing field of educational pedagogy from which we can learn. However, we see this as an issue which should pervade all forms of outdoor education and is indeed implicit in the personal and social development orientation of most programmes.

Similarly the Scandinavian tradition of 'Friluftsliv' (Outdoor Nature Life), which promotes a strong sense of feeling 'at home' in the natural world, can inform and may deeply influence the relationship between outdoor education and environmental education. This approach cannot be covered in detail here, but see Repp (1996) for an introduction.

We suggest that there is much that outdoor educators can contribute to the environmental education of those we work with. The traditional approaches noted above have great value but outdoor education can make an additional and, we believe, special contribution through the development of a 'sense of place'. The development of global awareness and a willingness to take responsibility for individual action should follow.

We will leave the final word to Roger Smith, a member of the 'Outdoor Writers Guild' who speaks of the sense of belonging he feels in certain places such as the Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland. 'We do not choose whom we love during our lives; in a real sense, they choose us. So it is with landscape it is a feeling of 'home', of caring and respect, familiarity but never taking for granted' (Smith, 1998: 148).

Notes

¹ Other outdoor activities, most notably sailing, have of course also inspired quality literature which has been absorbed into the outdoor education tradition. Our intention is not to exclude this but rather to focus on the dominant contribution of the mountaineering literature. Similarly art of various forms, including still and movie photography, has also made a strong contribution to aesthetic appreciation of recreational outdoor activities.

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