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Exploring Our Connections and Relationships with Place and/or Nature

Tonia Gray

Over the past 10-15 years, I have witnessed the delivery and Outdoor Education and Experiential Learning in Australia and New Zealand to take a different tangent. Typically, facilitators of Outdoor Education and Experiential Learning have operated '*in a bubble*' unaware or immune to the impact of nature upon human psyche and being. They have primarily been dislocated from nature, taking photographs of our outdoor experiences, but oblivious to the soulful text of the land. As Winton (2003, p.266) poignantly states 'aborigines sometimes question the "European" urge to climb high and look out across land from a bluff or peak. I suppose if you know what's there, if you're intimate with it in a bodily, spiritual way, you don't need to look.'

In an historical context, knowing, feeling and seeing the sacred text of the land has been the privilege of Indigenous cultures. Those like myself with a Euro-Celtic background have only recently been awakened to Indigenous values of reciprocity, respect and spirituality within the land by listening to their teachings. An understanding of the rhythms, cycles and interconnectedness of nature is the cornerstone of their existence and this is articulated by Suzuki and McConnell (2002, p.9) who state that:

'Layer upon layer of complexity means that nothing exists in isolation and that everything has its place within the cosmos ... In the same century that we have acquired a new creation story that explains our origins, we have lost touch with the traditional knowledge in which it has its roots ... we have become the most numerous mammal on Earth, possessed a staggering array of technology that enables us to extract resources from all parts of the globe. All humanity has become enmeshed in an economy built on the notion that endless growth is not only possible but also essential. And in the process we have lost our sense of place, our ancient understanding of the relationship with the world we depend.'

While the western view of spirituality is centred around a supreme being, Indigenous people find spirituality embedded in all elements of the cosmos (Kawagley and Barnhardt, 1998). The central tenet associated with the Indigenous ways of knowing is that everything is inseparably interconnected (Kawagley, 2001). In contemporary society our nature-estranged lifestyle has had far reaching consequences on the way we respect the land. Today, there is a grave risk that much Indigenous knowledge is being lost and along with it, the invaluable knowledge about ways of living sustainably (Molony, 2000). Preserving non-Western ways of knowing in the aftermath of industrialisation and colonialisation should be of paramount concern

to us all. Moreover, Lopez (2003, p. 165) states that 'by cutting ourselves off from nature, by turning nature into scenery and commodities we may have cut ourselves off from something vital. To repair this damage we can't any longer take what we call nature for an object'.

The predominant Western worldview is that nature is a commodity to be dissected and conquered. Conversely, Indigenous people do not consider the land as merely an economic resource (Poynton, 1994). Their ancestral lands are literally the source of life and they are defined in relation to the environment around them (Edwards, 1998). Slowly, non-Indigenous people have embraced their innate wisdom and close affinity with nature. Quite clearly we should live harmoniously with nature (Kawagley and Barnhardt, 1998) and as Tredinnick (2003, p.27) surmises 'I sense human beings live best when they remember that they live inside a natural order, that the land includes us and all our schemes and creations'. As a natural corollary, those involved with Outdoor Education and Experiential Learning have developed a yearning for a deeper relationship with place, land and nature. Indigenous notions that 'we don't own the land, the land owns us' and 'the land is impregnated and infused with spirit' (Ellis-Smith, 1999) have impacted upon the way we deliver our programs.

As we move further into the 21st Century our viewpoints are changing dramatically and we are becoming attuned to Indigenous knowledge. As Jacobs (1998, p.xiii) espouses 'there is a primordial awareness behind such thinking that is a natural heritage for us all'. This point is echoed by Winton (2003, p.267) when he states that 'travelling into landscape reminds us of our true position, as dependants, as fellow travellers'. My hope is that facilitators of Outdoor Education and Experiential Learning will carry this message to further magnitude in the years ahead.

The Contributions

The following section consists of seven chapters which explore our connections with place and space. Collectively, these chapters offer a sequence of experiences that facilitate a way of being with place. Brian Wattchow's chapter *Belonging to Proper Country: Australian outdoor education as experiencing relationships in place* is a call for us to *experience* relationships in place. The fundamental importance of *experiencing* and the crucial contribution of *place* in identity formation and sustenance are examined within a philosophical and pedagogical context. He discusses the pedagogical advantage of an experiential Outdoor Education through a phenomenological approach to studies in place and placelessness, the centrality of the body in *all* learning and the unique demands of place(s). Wattchow then critiques some entrenched Outdoor Education practices and demonstrates the dangers inherent in a place-less approach. He then provides examples of Outdoor Education that is attentive to the complex amalgam of nature, culture, identity and body, which constitutes the experience of a relationship in place, are explored. This chapter requests Outdoor Educators to consider their role as *place-guides* on our journey towards belonging to 'proper country'.

Peter Martin's chapter *Human To Nature Relationships Through Outdoor Education* examines some of his research findings in this domain. Some of his work has found that relationships with nature were more likely to develop when the participant's outdoor living and travel skills were appropriate to enable a sense of comfort and competence in relating to nature. Furthermore, comfort in nature was frequently raised as both a catalyst for, and consequence of, changed

relationships with nature. Interestingly however, comfort and high perceived competence in nature may facilitate affinity for nature, but this is not proposed to be a causal relationship. Experiences in nature which had a strong focus on skill learning could be made more effective in promoting relationships with nature, if periods of quiescence or relaxation from more intense activity were included. Martin espouses that solo experiences in nature (both physically and psychologically alone) can permit time for more detailed observation and attention to nature relationships, free of the potential distractions of social interactions. His chapter also surfaces the notion that revisiting places promotes increased relatedness by allowing participants to get to know and explore those places in greater depth. Many other issues are examined in depth and his contribution to this emerging field of knowledge is invaluable.

The origins of Birrell's chapter, *A Deepening Relationship with Place* are embedded in her own need for developing a deeper relationship with place. Birrell offers the practitioner a series of steps or a sequence of experiences that facilitate a way of being with place. The author's own experiences are taken from an encounter in one specific place, on the far south coast of NSW, interspersed with various aspects of the discourse on place, mostly from an ecological worldview.

Uncle Max Harrison's and Carol Birrell's chapter, *An Elder Speaks: Seeing, Reading, Feeling the Sacred Text of the Land* presents the teachings of an Indigenous elder in a user-friendly format. In the wake of the devastating 2001/2002 bushfires in NSW, they purposely brought together a group of non-Indigenous people in an attempt to understand more about the healing capacity of the bush through the eyes of the elder, Uncle Max. This chapter cleverly presents the ongoing dialogue between the group and Uncle Max and it provides some fascinating insights for those wanting first hand exposure to the teaching methodologies of Indigenous people.

Graham Ellis-Smith has provided two pieces of writing in this section. Ellis-Smith's first chapter *Rediscovering Our Indigenous Heart* enunciates that we share many common bonds with the rest of humanity. In particular, the nature-based belief systems of Indigenous cultures were also those of Euro-Celtic origin for many hundreds of thousands of years before they moved into more settled agriculture and industry approximately 10,000 years ago. Intrinsic within these cultures is a belief in the Spirit in all existence; everything is related and interconnected, intelligent life; and can be interacted with in this way.

Ellis-Smith notes that a common element in our ancient belief systems is the concept of the 'Dreaming'; which is about Soul Purpose, our reason for being alive. Nature based environmental and Indigenous cultural awareness programs can provide a doorway for inner-awakening of a persons 'Dreaming' and increased awareness of who they are. All of his programs honour the individuals' journey; incorporate Nature as an active, intelligent participant; and encourage deeper experience and respect of their natural environment based on physical and metaphysical relationships. Facilitator preparation is essential as it may be personally and professionally challenging for Outdoor Education leaders to go beyond seeing Nature as merely biological; or as a venue for physical and emotional experience and endurance. Ellis-Smith's experiences over the past decade with more than 18,000 participants suggest that many leaders, participants and education institutions are keen for this extended experience.

In his second chapter *Ancient Land – Current Connections*, Ellis-Smith articulates that our

connection to Nature goes beyond merely travelling through or working in the land or natural environment. The author grew up in a 'hunter-gatherer' family of Euro-Celtic origins in the Jarrah forest of south-western Australia. While his father worked in the coalmines of Collie to supply our main material support, at various times of the year the family harvested the fruits of the earth for their sustenance and pleasure. As a consequence, he learnt many stories and 'secrets' of the bush from a young age, fuelled by parents with much knowledge and affection for the bush. Ellis-Smith also experienced unseen 'presences' and strange inexplicable phenomenon common to Indigenous people and his chapter is compelling reading.

John Quay's chapter *Connecting Social and Environmental Education Through the Practice of Outdoor Education* articulates that from its early days, Outdoor Education has asserted its relevance to learning in both social education and environmental education. These two areas of knowledge have seemingly always been claimed as a part of Outdoor Education because of the way it has traditionally been conducted – groups of people living and working together in relatively natural environments. Many who teach Outdoor Education in secondary schools are aware that although social education and environmental education should go hand in hand within Outdoor Education, the ways that the two areas of study are actually approached pedagogically is often quite different. Quay argues that at one extreme, environmental education aspects of Outdoor Education are delivered in a teacher centered way. Ironically, this is at odds with the experiential learning methods which are at the core of Outdoor Education. At the other extreme, they are left for students to deal with as intangible parts of the experience. Outdoor Education teachers have searched for ways in which to deal with this dilemma, often turning to environmental education teachers for help. Quay's chapter explores an Outdoor Education approach to environmental education, which grows from understandings of social education.

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