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Developing an intimate “relationship” with nature through extreme sports participation

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This article explores the interplay between extreme sports and the natural world in which they take place. Prior theoretical work on extreme sports has often made anthropocentric assumptions about this relationship, taking for granted that extreme participants treat nature only as a resource for athletic consumption, valuable only for its human uses. From this perspective, the natural world is regarded as a playground or battlefield, as a means to test physical prowess and human capacity. In contrast, extreme sports participants involved in this study report developing an intimate and reciprocal relationship with the natural world. A phenomenological analysis of participant accounts reveals, among veteran extreme athletes, the development of a heightened respect for something greater than themselves and a realization that humanity is simply a part of the natural environment.

Keywords: ecocentricity; extreme sports; natural world; phenomenology; nature

Cet article explore les interactions entre les sports extrêmes et le monde naturel dans lequel ils se déroulent. En tenant pour acquis que les participants des sports extrêmes traitent la nature comme une activité récréative qui doit être maîtrisée, le travail théorique antécédent insiste sur le fait que ces activités ont une dimension très anthropocentrique. De ce point de vue, le monde naturel est considéré comme un champ de bataille, un lieu d'où les prouesses physiques et les capacités humaines sont démontrées. En revanche, les participants de sport extrême impliqués dans cette recherche démontrent leurs relations intimes et réciproques avec le monde naturel. Une analyse phénoménologique des entrevues avec des vétérans de sports extrêmes révèle que le développement des sports extrêmes est basé sur des notions de respect et une prise de conscience que l'humanité est tout simplement une partie de l'environnement naturel et de ces forces naturelles.

Mots-clés: écocentrisme; sports extrêmes; le monde naturel; la phénoménologie; nature

Introduction

The “extreme sport” label has become a confusing universal descriptor for a multitude of non-traditional independent and organized adventure activities. Terms such as “action

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sports,” “whiz sports,” “urban sports,” “free sports,” “lifestyle sports,” “alternative sports” and “fringe sports,” to name a few, are used interchangeably to describe the same type of activity. In this article, we take a narrow view on extreme sports and define them as independent leisure activities where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death (Brymer, 2005). Interestingly, one female participant who was an extreme mountaineer commented, “There’s no choice but to realise that if you get this wrong you will be dead” (BM, female mountaineer, mid-30s, personal communication, October 2004). In extreme sports, there is no room for error; the consequences of poor judgment can be devastating. The magnitude of difference from other sports was highlighted by one extreme skier (Ulmer, cited in Koerner, 1997, p. 2) who offered hyperbolically, “Imagine if every time you missed a basket, somebody would shoot you in the head.”

Typical extreme sports activities include BASE jumping (i.e. buildings, antennae, spans, earth), extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, big wave surfing and high-level mountaineering. Notably, BASE jumping is considered to be the most extreme of the parachute sports (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993), where participants jump from fixed structures such as cliffs, bridges or buildings rather than out of aeroplanes. Whereas skydivers use safety devices such as altitude warning technology and second parachutes, BASE jumpers do not carry such devices. As one BASE jumper put it, “There are no second chances” (EJ, male BASE jumper, early 70s, personal communication, April 2004).

Extreme skiing is performed off-piste and on sheer cliffs where a fall results in the skier tumbling out of control. Similarly, waterfall kayaking involves kayaking over high river structures of 30 m or more, where a misjudged attempt would most likely result in death (SB, male extreme kayaker, late 30s, personal communication, March 2002). In 2009, the world record for waterfall kayaking was a 55-m descent (Weaver, 2009). Big wave surfers ride waves over 20 feet in height, in which even some of the most renowned surfers have died (Warshaw, 2000). High-level mountaineering includes challenges such as independently venturing above the “death zone,” usually considered to be above 7500 m where the oxygen is thin and the body struggles to adjust (Breashears & Clark, 1998). On Mount Everest, for example, one person in every 10 who successfully summits, on average, will die on the way down as a result of an accident or exhaustion (Sutherland, 2006).

The traditional theoretical perspective on this phenomenon is that extreme sports have become an ideal outlet for individuals who are risk takers or adrenaline seekers (Brymer, 2006; Delle Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2003; Lambton, 2000; Olivier, 2006; Pizam, Reichel, & Uriely, 2002; Rinehart, 2000; Self, Henry, Findley, & Reilly, 2007; Simon, 2002). Theorists have sought to explain participants’ motivations through a range of analytical frameworks, including edgeworks (Laurendeau, 2008), sensation seeking (Rossi & Cereatti, 1993; Zuckerman, 2000), psychoanalysis (Hunt, 1995), neo-tribe or subcultural formation (Midol & Broyer, 1995) and masculinity theory (Pollay, 2001; Wheaton, 2003). However, these risk-focused accounts often put forward by non-participants using theory-driven methodologies may involve judgments that are not supported by the actual, lived experiences of extreme sports participants (Brymer, 2005; Brymer, Downey, & Gray, 2009; Brymer & Oades, 2009; Celsi et al., 1993; Willig, 2008).

Furthermore, such risk-focused explanations of extreme sports focus exclusively on potential negative outcomes. These analytical frameworks do not take into account that extreme sport participation depends totally on the whims of the natural world; no water in the rivers means no kayaking; wind in the wrong direction means no BASE jumping. In this

article, the authors specifically explore the *relationship* between extreme sport participation and the natural world through the accounts of participants.

Extreme sports and the anthropocentric perspective

From an anthropocentric or materialistic point of view, the natural world is seen as *other* by humankind, where nature exists purely to benefit humanity (Mathews, 2006). Nature is considered to be either a force to conquer as a means to develop individual or social identity; a space in which to commune with like-minded groups; a resource ripe for depletion; or a playground in which to participate in self-indulgent activities (Shoham, Rose, & Kahle, 2000).

The traditional, dominant perspective on the role of nature in extreme sports maintains that the natural world acts only as a worthy opponent ripe for battling and conquering (Celsi et al., 1993; Millman, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1999). This adversarial relationship suggests that as humans we may have become so isolated from the natural world that it has become something to fear and, therefore, control (Stilgoe, 2001). In the same vein, Le Breton (2000) proposed that extreme sports were a medium for Western athletes to test their capacity to “resist increasing personal suffering” (p. 1). He suggested that this individual contest provides an ideal outlet for testing one’s courage and resources. This battle or contest is not against other athletes, but is lived out as a “hand-to-hand fight with nature” (p. 2), where an individual’s struggle against nature is believed to add importance and intrinsic value to his or her life (Abram, 1996; Zimmerman, 1992). In contrast, however, recent work by Brymer & Gray (2010) has presented a different, more harmonious picture where participants consider that movement through nature at an extreme level is only possible when participants understand and work with natural forces.

The ecocentric perspective

Beyond the anthropocentric and egocentric (Vanreusal, 1995) approaches lies what Kleffell (1996) described as the ecocentric understanding. An ecocentric perspective recognizes that nature has intrinsic value and does not just exist as a resource for humanity. Mountains, rivers, waves and so on have inherent value (Oelschlaeger, 1992). The proponents of this approach argue that modern industrialized society has triggered a perception that humanity is separate from the natural world; as a result, society as a whole has become alienated from and even fearful of the natural world (Louv, 2008; Schultz, 2000, 2002).

The essential proposition of the ecocentric perspective is that humanity is a part of nature (Davis, 1996; DeMares & Krycka, 1998; Lundmark, 2007; Scull, 1999). That is, despite perceptions that human beings are unique amongst animals and superior to the rest of nature, we are part of nature in the same way that other animals are part of nature (Williams & Parkman, 2003). An ecocentric stance does not support the notion of nature as a battleground, playing field or resource; an ecocentric approach leads to considering nature-as-family, nature-as-self or nature-as-unity. From this position, to fight nature is to fight oneself, to understand nature is to understand oneself, to be in the natural world in all its glory is to be in oneself in all one’s own glory (Glendinning, 1994; Watts, 1970). As Duerr (1985) observed, from an ecocentric perspective, we can only really know our true selves if we experience and cross our civilized boundaries by re-turning to wildness, overcoming alienation and, ironically, confronting death.

Study overview

This article draws on findings from a hermeneutic phenomenological study of the extreme sport experience. The focus of the hermeneutic phenomenological study was to gain a deeper understanding of the extreme sport experience from the point of view of extreme sport participants (van Manen, 1997). In this article, the authors discuss one component of the study findings in an effort to better understand the “relationship” between extreme sport participants and the natural world. These findings show that, for participants in this study, engagement in extreme sports facilitates the development of an ecocentric framework and a subsequent realization that the natural world is not *other*, that humanity is in fact part of the natural order.

Phenomenological research seeks to illuminate the essence of an experience, as it is understood by those having the experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as opposed to other variants of this philosophical school, accepts that lived experiences are made sense of through language, and therefore participant accounts reflect the ways that individual participants make sense of their experience (Willis, 2001). In practice, this means that the researcher must interpret participant accounts of their experiences to gain insights into the nature of their experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This hermeneutic process is undertaken as a means to offer descriptions of the experience as opposed to proposing explanations or classifications.

Hermeneutic phenomenological researchers understand that, although language and explicit accounts are a crucial tool in understanding experience, much of our immediate experience is pre-reflective and thus not wholly determined or captured by language (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Therefore, this approach aims to penetrate deeper, beyond the reflective interpretation of an event, to reveal the essence of an experience. This process includes elements that might elude language or be underemphasized in explicit accounts because language is not sufficient to communicate abstract dimensions of experience (van Manen, 1997). As Willis (2001) pointed out:

When speech, language and thought patterns generated from experiences in the world are used, they always involve an interpretive process: but the aim here is to try to disclose the most naïve and basic interpretation that is already there but as yet is unelaborated in the life world experience, a phenomenological hermeneutic. (p. 7)

The hermeneutic approach is particularly appropriate when attempting to assemble a phenomenological account of other people’s lived experiences, especially when this experience is being studied for the first time, when a particular topic requires a fresh perspective or when the experience is difficult to access (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach is to carefully gather and analyze first-hand accounts of an experience from those who have had the experience rather than projecting the analysts’ own biases or preconceived understandings of what is occurring. In practice, this process requires that the researcher be open to what informants report during the data gathering and analysis process. This requires that the researcher suspend or “bracket” previous knowledge or subjective understandings about the experience.

The hermeneutic phenomenologist openly makes use of various forms of text when investigating an experience, triangulating between diverse perceptions and media (Willis, 2001). In this study, the authors explored the work of poets, authors, artists and cinematographers in addition to participant interviews in the desire to more fully explicate the “immediate common experience in order to conduct a structural analysis of what is common, most familiar, most-evident to us” (Willis, 2001, p. 19). In the course of this

broad phenomenological exploration into the extreme sport experience, ecocentric awareness began to emerge as one of the core elements of the extreme sport experience. This emergent theme is particularly poignant because the study did not set out to explore the relationship between extreme sports participation and the natural world.

Research methods

Data sources included interviews with 15 extreme sport participants (10 men and 5 women, aged 30–70 years) and videos, biographies and autobiographies about extreme sport participants from around the world. Extreme sport participants were chosen based on the following criteria: (a) they participated in independent leisure activities that we classified as “extreme sports” and (b) they were older than the population usually considered to be primary participants. This second point was important because there is a long-standing body of research that claims young people (i.e. 16–25 years of age) search for risk-taking opportunities in various activities (Janssen, Dostaler, Boyce, & Pickett, 2007; Jonah, 1986; Sharland, 2006). As such, interviews with this age group raised the possibility of a focus on the *risk-taking* experience, which would detract from our aim of exploring the *extreme sport* experience. Interview participants were also chosen based on their willingness to explore, through reflection, the extreme sport experience.

Participants in this study were involved in BASE jumping, big wave surfing, extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, extreme mountaineering and solo rope-free climbing. Participants in alternative, lifestyle or subculture sports that did not fit the definition as outlined above, including surfing, skiing, skateboarding, BMX (bicycle motocross), which were engaged in at a level where participants ran minimal chance of a fatal accident, were not included although these sports are sometimes referred to as “extreme sports” by the popular press. Interview participants were chosen for their experience in extreme sports and for their ability and willingness to explore their experiences, not for their knowledge of the phenomenological framework (Van Kaam, 1966).

The interviews

In this study, interviews were undertaken as focused conversations with extreme sport participants and were conducted face to face or by phone. Questions that guided the interview process included: “What is the extreme sport experience?” and “How is the extreme sport experience perceived by participants?” Throughout the interview process, follow-up questions were posed as a means to explore more deeply points raised by participants. In other words, the open-ended format sought to get interview subjects to elaborate on topics that they themselves had raised in response to basic open-ended initial questions. The open-ended, response-driven interview process is especially suitable for hermeneutical phenomenology because the themes are explored in terms introduced by the informants themselves, not by the interviewer. *Participants were not asked about their relationship to the natural world, but provided discussions of the topic spontaneously.*

The analysis

Each individual tape was first listened to and then transcribed and read, then thematically analyzed as a separate entity. All transcripts were revisited as themes became more explicit. Both formal and non-formal understandings of potential themes were continually

questioned, challenged and assessed for relevancy. The researcher highlighted interesting phrases, and any relevant non-verbal considerations were noted. These notes were reconsidered in terms of potential underlying thematic phrases or meaning units (DeMares, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Redundancy and validity checks were run post-analysis to ensure the clarity and comprehensiveness of the analysis.

A similar interpretation process was undertaken with research papers, videos, biographies and autobiographies. Texts were categorized as being an appropriate source for understanding the extreme sport experience if the text topic met the definition of extreme sports as defined in this study and if the text disclosed the pre-reflective experience of extreme athletes. Sources that did not meet these criteria, such as technical manuals or chronological descriptions that focused on external portraits of the activities, were not included.

Thematic ideas that emerged from this careful examination were clustered and further defined. Superordinate themes were considered against the original transcripts to ensure the accuracy of interpretations (e.g. we made sure that the analysis did not group together concepts that subjects used to make fine distinctions that they found important). This entire process of moving between the emerging themes and the whole text was repeated again and again with the aim of developing an understanding of the extreme sport experience.

Results and discussion

The traditional perspective on the relationship between extreme sports and the natural world is one where the natural world is considered *other* by humanity. Participants are said to strive to conquer or battle nature, in their desire either to forge an identity or build a courageous reputation or to prove themselves. This assumption draws on the supposition that extreme sports are experienced primarily as “risk,” with a motivation to prove oneself, and that nature is primarily an inert obstacle or antagonistic force.

We explore an alternative or emerging perspective from interpretations of interview and other data. The analysis suggests that veteran extreme sport participants in this study express a kinship with the natural world, even suggesting how this recognition emerges over the course of their careers in these dangerous activities. This article presents on the theme that “humanity is part of nature,” a recurring motif in our accounts and one that ran counter to earlier descriptions of extreme sport participants’ experiences.

In the following section, we use quotations from a variety of sources to illustrate the theme. Where the source is a direct participant quote, we have used initials and a brief description to protect participant anonymity.

On the notion of conquering and battling

Houston (1968), a medical doctor and world-class extreme mountaineer, was quite clear in his interview that the relationship between climber and mountain could not be one of conqueror and conquered, stating that “the aim is not to conquer, for mountain climbing is not a conflict between man and nature” (p. 49). Compare those words with the following from a whitewater kayaker recalling a trip in Russia:

You cannot conquer a river. How can you defeat something that is never the same twice, that is unaware of your presence? To the river, we are so much flotsam, and if we forget that the results can be decidedly final. It is often difficult to remember the force of the river in places

like this; the water can smash a swimmer to pieces on the rocks and leave them broken like a doll or a piece of rubbish bobbing in the backwaters of an eddy.

There was enough force in “The thing you strain spaghetti through after you’ve cooked it” [*the name of a particular rapid*] to rip us from our frail craft and pound us like so much drift wood. And the river wouldn’t even know we were dead. There can be no competition, no way we can fight against the huge forces we travel in. (Guilar, 1999, Chap. 11)

Those who participate in extreme sports consider the concept of fighting or conquering the environment, at best, an unfortunate misunderstanding, although they clearly recognize that it is a perception that they must explicitly negate. For instance, Page (2003) wrote that big waves pay no attention to the surfers riding them and by implication would not even know that a competition was taking place. Breashears (1999), a mountaineer, explained the relationship as one akin to a facilitator, highlighting the fragility of those who climb:

If ever there was a mountain that can temper human arrogance and teach humility, it’s Everest. Whatever name you want to give it, the Nepali Sagarmatha, or the Tibetan Chomolungma – the Mother Goddess – or the British surveyor general’s name, Everest, the mountain is a massive living presence that changes every day. With the terrible winds of 1986, it seems that Everest was intent on showing us how fragile we truly are. (p. 171)

The notion that extreme sport participation is somehow connected to a desire for battling against or conquering the natural world does not fit with the experiences of those who participate at an extreme level and they repeatedly reference this view of their activities in the negative, as if they need to dispel a mistaken understanding. In the words of Lynn Hill, an extreme climber:

It is not about going out there and conquering something – proving that you are somehow stronger than other people or the rock you’re about to climb. It is much more about interacting with your environment.

I guess the whole extreme movement is somehow an attempt to try to recreate the 1960’s . . . maybe some people think that there’s something to be gained by “defying” nature the way the young people in the 1960’s defied authority. I’m not sure. I just know that that’s not the way I do things. (Hill cited in Olsen, 2001, pp. 59, 60)

Ironically, participants explicitly deny the most common assumptions about extreme sports made by researchers interested in the formation of identity. For example, Hill (cited in Olsen, 2001) argued against an interpretation of climbing that assumes alternative or sub-cultural group identity emerges through battles against nature’s authority; if some climbers share this identity, she specifically denies she is part of such a group. Instead, Hill describes climbing as adapting to the rock, not imposing oneself on the environment but rather letting the rock shape the climber; the experience requires skills “more like water – strong but soft” (p. 67). A climber yields, adapts and is in harmony with the rock: “It’s all about learning to adapt totally to the environment you’re in” (p. 69).

The implication of these quotations is that participants in extreme sports accept that they cannot control their environment and that they are powerless compared with the natural world. Participants forego any attempt to control natural forces. They are in the natural world and, to participate successfully, must learn to understand their limitations and adapt.

On being part of nature

Lynn Hill's account also suggests that for successful participation, an extreme sports participant must accept that the natural world is greater than the participant. The extreme sport participant must adapt and adjust to the natural world. A participant must accept that he or she is only a small part of the natural world. As Bane (1996) said:

You cannot "fight" the river. You are in it a part of it, being acted on by not just what you can see on the surface, but surging raging currents below the surface. They pull you in contradictory directions, shove your legs apart and together. The river is unimaginably strong and you are so very, very small. (p. 107)

Interacting with natural forces in extreme sports facilitates the realization that the gap between the power of the natural environment and a human being is vastly unequal – in the face of a river or mountain, an athlete is comparatively powerless. A participant foregoes any attempt to control natural forces, but as Bane (1996) insinuated in the quote above, he or she may also realize an experience of being part of something more powerful than self:

I don't ever attempt to control the environment I'm in because it's so much more powerful than me that all I can do is go with it. (SB, male waterfall kayaker, late 30s, personal communication, March 2002)

Nature, it would seem, is too powerful to attempt to control:

You really have to accept that you have a measure of control, but you don't have control the mountain could fluff you out in a second. (KU, female extreme skier, mid-30s, personal communication, February, 2002)

For Laird Hamilton, an extreme surfer, participation in extreme surfing triggered a deeper appreciation for life in general through the natural world as something greater and more powerful than humanity (Williams, Hamilton, & Kachmer, 2001).

In the face of such power, extreme athletes accept that the natural world is greater than they are and that participation depends on understanding the environment and on learning to work with it. For instance, Olsen (2001) quoted Lignel, a mountaineer who experienced the mountain as something spiritual and sacred. Successful mountaineers have to know their own limits, respect the mountain and accept that reaching the summit depends on the mountain "tell[ing] you when it is possible" (Lignel cited in Olsen, 2001, p. 99). For this climber, heightened awareness of the whim of weather and other conditions means that the athlete must attend to the lessons of nature, constantly sensitive to changes in conditions.

Arguably, this view of nature as a powerful actor can still be an antagonistic understanding of the natural world with the simple recognition that any direct confrontation is likely to end badly for a frail human. However, extreme sports participants clearly indicate that participation brings about a realization that not only is the natural world more powerful, but also humanity is directly connected to or part of the natural world (Lignel cited in Olsen, 2001, p. 99).

Rather than simply being cowed or intimidated by nature's power, extreme athletes report an exhilarating sense of participation in the power itself and insights into the interconnectedness of nature. For example, a BASE jumper described being atop natural objects, preparing to leap:

The place is still powerful, it has energy and it's giving back to you. For me, I get an insight into the fact that we're interconnected, and that while we can die, life and everything is connected. We're all part of this cycle. This sounds very esoteric I know, and it's difficult to put into words, but with B.A.S.E. jumping, you can go places that other people can't go. You can stand on the edge of these huge cliffs and put your arms in the air where you're totally vulnerable and totally part of the environment, at the same time. So it gives an opportunity to experience places and a way of looking at things that we can't normally do because we're too restricted by fences and rules and our own fear. The first time I B.A.S.E. jumped, it was one of those experiences that shatters the way that you looked at things in the past. We look at things through all these filters, and we judge without even being aware of it. It's an unconscious thing, constantly, constantly filtering and judging. An experience like B.A.S.E. jumping helps you shatter all of those things so you become inordinately humble but inordinately self-possessed and confident at the same time. All of a sudden, you're totally connected to the environment, no longer an "I". You're not bound by the constraints of a physical body anymore. When you get an insight into that, it's a life-altering insight. (HS, female B.A.S.E. jumper, late 30s, personal communication, April 2002)

At one level, this appreciation for humanity's place as connected to the natural world is experienced as being part of something "bigger" and happens while undertaking the activity. HS suggests that participating in BASE jumping initiated a realization of a connection that equates to being part of something greater, something that triggers feelings of vulnerability, which at the same time is liberating and empowering, "self-possessed and confident" at the same time as "inordinately humbled."

A female mountaineer described a similar experience, at once profoundly aware of her own relative powerlessness and yet exalted by a connection to such great power:

You can't be in control of anything when you are in the natural environment, you know. You just have to, . . . you are in it, and you are just a minute part of it and you just see what happens. You can't control the environment . . . that connection in place and time, yes, just feeling part of something huge and wonderful. (BM, female mountaineer, late 30s, personal communication, October 2004)

Here, BM attempts to articulate a profound gap between feelings of connection and feelings of powerlessness. BM pauses as she moves in her account from feeling lack of control to being moved by her feelings of being embedded in "something huge and wonderful." In this case, a phenomenological analysis can only explore the difficulty to articulate reversal by carefully piecing together similar transitions in the first-hand accounts of many practitioners.

Another participant interviewed for this project likened the connection to a primal realization:

You know, you're in this incredibly spectacular environment dealing with really, really primal forces. Not only primal forces in the environment but primal forces within yourself . . . We have primitive parts of our being that are connected to primitive parts of every other being . . . We are part of everything that's around us; at some deep, deep, deep unconscious level connected to it. To go mountaineering is to reinvigorate, re-establish that connection. (GS, male mountaineer, early 40s, personal communication, April 2002)

Here, GS finds something he feels is hidden within every human being, although only revealed to him on the side of a mountain. He repeats "really" and "deep" to emphasize how central this realization is, the revelation of something "unconscious" and "primal" that connects him to all that is around him. Instead of nature being something outside himself,

a risk or adversary, he sees it as an environment to reinvigorate a profound felt connection to the world.

As in GS's account, the extreme sports experience is often depicted as dealing with a primal force within oneself and the environment. RT (male big wave surfer, early 50s, personal communication, January 2002) described the experience as "a raw instinct." SB, an extreme kayaker echoed this point with a depiction of the experience as touching a base instinct hidden deep within. JM (male extreme mountaineer, mid-40s, personal communication, October 2004) spoke of connecting to a primal animal state: "but you know, for me, probably at its core is . . . it's what it is to be an animal." Later he explained that this state reminded him that "normal" human life was "very removed from the rest of the animal kingdom" and that this animal state was the most simple state to be in: "it's really simple. . . there's something within us all . . . it's an instinct." Throughout our conversation, JM insisted that he could not find the words to explore this issue completely, but that he was sure that all animals felt the same way and that this connected all animals:

There are some things that transcend language. The animals all understand what it is, a herd animal or any sort of animal will know exactly . . . and they'll know that the other animals understand as well. (JM, male extreme mountaineer, mid-40s, personal communication, October 2004)

Schultheis (1996) likened his ineffable climbing experience to a shamanic vision quest that instigated an over-the-edge leap into transcendence. Schultheis recognized that his extreme sport activities were 'the only truly sane things' (Schultheis, 1996, foreword) that he embarked on. A trigger to a new perspective on life was brought about by "soaring with the hawks, diving with the dolphins, running with the elk" (Schultheis, 1996, foreword). Soden (2003) likened an element of the experience of being in nature to an ape flying through the trees, as if the participant was in touch with a primitive aspect of being human. Kremer also portrayed the experience as tapping into the "ultimate energy" (Kremer, 2003, p. 376). Jacobs (1998) described the relationship as a union with a universal primal awareness.

In all cases, these many variants describe the extreme sport experience as revealing a truth about human nature as understood by the accounts of those participants in this study. Participants relate their experience to a core reality as natural beings, and a connection to the world, that is generally obscured in everyday life. Gonzales (2003) explored the notion that an intimate understanding of the energy and forces of nature seems to be forgotten in the modern world as we become further removed from nature's presence. He reported that those successfully participating at extreme levels have developed an intimate relationship with their chosen environment. A relationship based on experience that is more profound and affecting than an abstract understanding or detached knowledge gained second hand.

Implications

An ecocentric perspective accepts that humanity exists as a part of the natural world. Extreme sports participants in this study describe participating in extreme sports as facilitating the realization that humanity is just part of a more powerful natural world. Their accounts may even contain an implicit process leading from recognition of one's powerlessness in the face of nature to a dawning thrill at being part of such a powerful reality.

Furthermore, participants suggest that engagement at a level where death is a real possibility initiates a return from the dialectic alienated view of the natural world as *other* to an embracing of nature that restores interconnectedness and reciprocity (Langer, 1990). From

their participation in extreme sports, they come to recognize that nature, which is typically considered alien, beyond or even antagonistic to our humanity, is actually our proper place that re-establishes connection. Extreme sport participation seems to restore a positive relationship to the natural world and leads to a realization that humanity is part of the natural world. Moving beyond an internal–external duality, extreme athletes experience connectedness and reposition the natural world in their experience from “Other” and “Over-there” to merge with the “Self” and “Here” (Langer, 1990). Such a momentary integration passes beyond a naïve understanding of the relationship between self and the natural world to a new ecocentric understanding.

Conclusion

The conventional, theoretical approach to exploring extreme sports such as BASE jumping, extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking and rope-free climbing emphasizes risk and risk taking. From this perspective, the natural world is considered an ideal arena for demonstrating individual capacity. The relationship between the extreme sport participant and the natural world is said to be adversarial where nature is regarded as an inert object that is *separate* from humanity. However, this perception of nature as *other* to humanity does not seem to match the understandings of the veteran extreme athletes who partook in this study. Participants seem clear that extreme sport participation provided a context for appreciating humanity’s connection to the natural world and the realization that humanity is just a small part of the greater whole. Participants maintain that this ecocentric realization stems from a growing awareness of a core reality that extends through all natural beings, but that is concealed in the everyday happenings of modern human life.

We cannot tell from the research whether this ecocentric awakening is a typical outcome for extensive extreme sport experience or if an ecocentric perspective is characteristic of those participants who are more likely to continue participation to become veteran practitioners. However, the participants themselves specifically attribute heightened ecocentric awareness to their extreme sports experiences. Our research concludes that these activities may have powerful, transformative potential for fostering intimate human–nature relationships.

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