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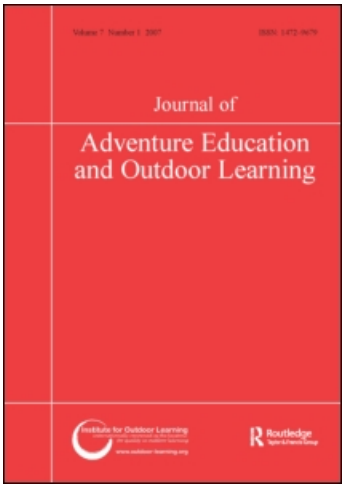

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Whose place, whose history? Outdoor environmental education pedagogy as 'reading' the landscape

Alistair Stewart[a]
[a] La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia

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Whose place, whose history? Outdoor environmental education pedagogy as 'reading' the landscape

Alistair Stewart*
La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia

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Outdoor education practice around the world occurs in diverse circumstances, environments and cultures. The application of outdoor education to specific cultural and environmental issues in particular places and communities has received little attention in research. While research in fields such as cultural geography has addressed the relationships between cultures, communities and geographical places, this is largely overlooked in outdoor education research. In this paper I draw on literature from cultural history and environmental history to explore how these disciplines might inform outdoor education research and pedagogy that addresses current cultural and environmental issues of specific communities and geographical places. With the aid of the rhizome metaphor for (re)structuring knowledge, I use examples from my practice in Australia to demonstrate how reading the landscape and the use of stories, or historical accounts, can assist outdoor educators and participants to probe and reflect on the relationships between personal experience and the complex cultural-ecological processes that have shaped the places in which we live and work.

Introduction

> Sand and stone, with the slightest covering of vegetation, everywhere presented themselves on the lower lands; and the many shining parts on the sides of the hills showed them to be still more bare. The vegetation, indeed, consisted of an abundant variety of shrubs and small plants, and yielded a delightful harvest to the botanists; but to the herdsman and cultivator it promised nothing; not a blade of grass, nor a square yard of soil from which the seed delivered to it could be delivered back, was perceivable by the eye in its course over these arid plains (Matthew Flinders [1802] cited in Fornasiero, Monteath, & West-Sooby, 2004, p. 77).

Seeking to be the first to circumnavigate *Terra Australis* (Australia) in 1801–03, Matthew Flinders' observations of the southern Western Australian landscape epitomise

*Corresponding author: Centre for Excellence in Outdoor and Environmental Education, La Trobe University, Bendigo Campus, PO Box 199, Victoria 3552, Australia. Email: a.stewart@latrobe.edu.au

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European scientific and commercial interests in the continent. Even though Flinders had very limited knowledge of the great southern land, as a man of the Enlightenment he used his scientific background to make detailed hydrographical observations of the Australian coastline (Fornasiero et al., 2004). Flinders' journals are full of entries similar in nature to the one above.

> Creek, plain, hill.
> That plain can change . . .
> wet season, him mud.
> You get lily,
> you get fish.
> But, he dry up . . .
> that's all right.
> Then people can get long-neck turtle.
> Same for animal.
> People look for food,
> animal look for food.
> Lizard look,
> bird look,
> anyone look
> We all the same (Bill Neidjie cited in Neidjie, Davis, & Fox, 1985, p. 40).

Bill Neidjie's knowledge of the Australian landscape, in contrast with Flinders, was built up over an extended period of time in the one area. Neidjie was an indigenous Australian of the Kakadu area in northern Australia, where his people, the Gagudju (Kakadu), have lived for at least 40,000 years. Neidjie's knowledge of the environment was shaped by his cultural heritage and his close relationship with the land. His knowledge of where to find food at different times of the year was situational, contextual, and while not readily 'observable' through this medium, it was also performative.

> Though they move through the same world, people see, understand, experience and value quite different things. They can walk around the same water, scuff the same dust and sit under the same trees, but they are not in the same place (Strang, 1997, p. 4).

Veronica Strang, an anthropologist, sheds light on how people of different cultural backgrounds relate to and understood the same physical place in markedly different ways. In her book *Uncommon ground: Cultural landscapes and environmental values*, Strang compares the relationships with the land of two very different groups of people of far northern Queensland: the Aboriginal people and the white cattle farmers. Each group tells stories of the country using different types of knowledge, organised in different ways that reveal strikingly different relationships with the land, seemingly as if it were not the same place.

Outdoor environmental education, in theory and practice, is a process of telling, performing, representing and creating stories about places, people and their interactions. Education, including outdoor environmental education, is not value-free (Jickling & Spork, 1998), and takes place under diverse circumstances, environments and cultures. As an educator and researcher I am interested in the ways that stories (historical accounts) of how people have related to each other and the land

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might be used to help to probe and reveal some of the complexities within existing values and understandings of the land and its people. In doing so I hope to 'unsettle' the nature/culture divide that is still present in Australian culture. My interest here is in the junction of the meaning and implications of stories (history) communicated through the process of education and the location or setting of education (this is informed by Gough's (2000) observation that people and knowledge are located somewhere (rather than everywhere/anywhere)). Thus, this paper is concerned with stories that are communicated through physical engagement with a place, particularly parts of Australia: what insights might cultural and environmental histories reveal about relationships between people and land; to what extent are these stories culturally and geographically specific; how might these stories be 'read' in a landscape; and, how might they reinforce a sense of (dis)location.

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Meaning making: outdoor experience as text

Brookes (2002b), in his paper 'Lost in the Australian bush: Outdoor education as curriculum', observes that outdoor education discourse in Victoria, Australia, has failed to recognise the extent to which it has been shaped by local social, cultural, historical and geographical factors. Brookes uses the question 'is any form of outdoor education essential?' to 'probe some of the conceptual limits of outdoor education discourse' (p. 405). In doing so Brookes suggests that:

> the question of whether outdoor education is necessary requires a curriculum conversation that is attentive to the particulars of relationships between communities and geographical regions and can provide a conceptual grasp on the reality-constituting and epistemological dimensions of outdoor experience (p. 405).

Brookes argues that the failure of Victorian outdoor education discourse to recognise the significance of particular social, cultural and geographic contexts in shaping distinctive programmes has 'been attended by an uncritical acceptance of imported outdoor-education theory, and point[s] to some widespread inadequacies in outdoor-education theory internationally' (p. 406). Brookes goes on to contend that:

> The development of universalist outdoor education can be read as the continuance of a colonizing mind-set, operating not through obvious physical occupation but through seepage into everyday assumptions in what Rouse (1987) has termed, following Foucault, the capillary effects of power (p. 407).

In Australia, discussion about how outdoor environmental education might or should be tailored to address relationships with the environment have been occurring for some time (see for example Martin, 1999a, 1999b, 2004; Martin & Thomas, 2000; Thomas & Thomas, 2000). Yet, it is only in more recent times that this discussion has started to reflect specific cultural and geographical contexts rather than abstract notions of 'the environment' (see, for example, Brookes, 2002a; Lugg, 2004; Preston, 2004; Preston & Griffiths, 2004; Stewart, 2004a, 2004b; Blades, 2005). Reflecting on a call for an *Australian* curriculum, Brookes (2002b, p. 406) posed the question 'does it matter if, and how, contemporary Australians experience the bush?'.

Brookes suggests two imperatives for treating as educationally problematic the apparent urbanisation of the Australian consciousness: the need to improve relationships between Aboriginal and settler Australians, and environmental issues. Brookes (2002b) argues that:

> Environmental issues do not boil down entirely to questions of personal or local knowledge, but at the same time abstractions and representations are always incomplete. The question is not just about knowledge, but about the experiential and narrative structures in which knowledge is comprehended (p. 407).

Given the radical transformation that the Australian landscape has undergone since European settlement, and the current poor state of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal political leaders in Australia, I would suggest that it is essential that outdoor environmental educators consider carefully the ways in which outdoor experiences introduce participants to particular 'stories' of the land, whose land it is or has been, and how it has changed over time. Researchers in a range of discourses would agree that it does matter if and how contemporary Australians encounter a place (see for example Relph, 1976; Raffan, 1993; Read, 1996, 2000; Seddon, 1997; Cameron, 2003; Gruenewald, 2003; Cormack, Green, & Reid, 2006).

In 'Neuromancing the stones: Experience, intertextuality, and cyberpunk science fiction' Gough (1993) uses the concept of intertextuality, the process of relating every text to every other text in the production of meaning, to critically question the types of texts that may be used in outdoor experiential education and the different readings of the world that they might encourage. Gough argues that the uncritical use of texts such as *The earth speaks* (Van Matre & Weiler, 1983) may lead to (mis)understandings of experience and the environment not intended by educators. Gough also suggests that experience can be seen as a text and that 'the ways in which [learners] encode their interpretations of experience will reflect their prior readings of other texts' (p. 12). I find the idea of 'experience as text' useful when thinking about the process of developing educational outdoor experiences. It promotes questions such as 'what stories might students unintentionally read from an experience?', 'are there any sub-texts that I would rather were more explicit or not present?', and 'am I allowing the place and its history to have a voice in the experience?'.

More recently Gough and Sellers (2004) use Deleuze's rhizomatic concept for inquiry and textuality, to suggest alternative directions for outdoor and environmental education research. For Gough and Sellers 'rhizomatics re/de/sign the grand arboreal metaphor—the tree of knowledge—with the more humble metaphor of the rhizome—the meanderings of stems and shoots—for mutually constitutive worldly knowings' (p. 6). Gough and Sellers use poststructuralist ideas in an attempt to disrupt conventional linear notions of research:

> Our intentions are towards showing ways of processing research through generative deconstruction of striations, reflecting concerning matters, and performing smoothings . . . Outdoor education-researching is well suited to processual inquiry. It can be responsive to notions of felt rather than fabric. It can understand that striated is embodied in smoothness (p. 19).

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I find the metaphor of the rhizome suggested by Gough and Sellers, to be a useful alternative when thinking about how knowledge, stories or experiences that may appear unrelated can be connected by a thread or narrative. When one thinks about an outdoor environmental education experience as a text that those involved 'mutually constitute' (collectively 'write'), there is considerable scope for participants to develop (mis)understandings other than those intended by the educator. Attention to the epistemological and ontological dimensions of experience can lead to vastly different encounters and understandings of a place (Stewart, 2004a, 2004b). This, I would suggest, is how recreational experiences of a place may be transformed into education. I will return to the use of this metaphor later in the paper.

The (re)creation of Australia—a short history

> We hold [the land] neither by inheritance, by purchase, nor by conquest, but by a sort of gradual eviction. As our flocks and herds and population increase . . . the natural owners of the soil are thrust back without treaty, bargain or apology . . . depasturing licences are procured from government, stations are built, the natives and the game on which they feed are driven back . . . the graves of their fathers . . . trodden underfoot (Godfrey Charles Mundy [1852] cited in McKenna, 2002, p. 28).

Prior to the settlement of Europeans in Australia in the late 1700s indigenous people inhabited all environments of the continent.[1] The settlement of Europeans brought a radical cultural and environmental change, not unlike that experienced in other parts of the world as a result of colonisation. Unlike the indigenous people, post-1788 settlers have tended to concentrate in urban areas, largely on the east and south-east coast, and to a lesser extent on the south-west coast (in 2001, 66% of population lived in five major cities and 87% in cities and inner regional areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003)). As Brookes (2002b) has highlighted, this is educationally problematic when one considers that managerial responsibility for vast and complex landscapes lies with a culturally diverse, large urban population.

Many of the European settlers were unfamiliar with the nature of 'nature' that they encountered in Australia: highly variable and unpredictable rainfall, trees that lost their bark instead of their leaves, and rivers that dried up and/or flowed inland was not how nature ought to behave (Carter, 1987). Yet, Europeans settling in Australia have not, by-and-large, adjusted their cultural understanding of the land to fit its characteristics, but rather have transformed the landscape to fit European notions and sensibilities. This can be seen, for example, in how the flow of Australia's largest river system, the Murray River, has been transformed from irregular and unpredictable to reliable and constant with the use of dams, weirs and channels (Sinclair, 2001).

Australia, although thousands of kilometres from Europe, has been described as a 'neo-Europe', along with North America, Argentina, New Zealand and parts of Chile and southern Brazil (Crosby cited in Arnold, 1996). The indigenous people were dispossessed and displaced, and in many cases murdered or massacred,[2] to be replaced by people largely of European descent. In turn, the native flora and fauna

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have been replaced with European grasses, cereal crops, fruit and vegetables, weeds and livestock. Without predators and with few diseases many of these plants and animals have flourished. This is particularly evident in temperate parts of Australia, such as where I live in central Victoria, where only 17% remains of the once extensive Box-Ironbark woodland that formerly covered much of the region (Environment Conservation Council, 1997). The introduction of non-native plants and animals has underpinned the establishment of a European way of life (Arnold, 1996), one that Rolls (2000) argues is unsuited to the landscape:

> Our [European] culture made us unfit occupants of this country. We looked at the land with thousands of years of good European farming behind us and expected the soil to behave like the soils we knew. Prurient morals countered nakedness obscene—a failing we have still not overcome—so we regarded Aboriginal Australians, not as masters of this land which they had designed, but as ignorant savages. Both government and church believed the 100-year-old definition of John Locke in his *Two treaties of government* published in London in 1690 that land 'left wholly to nature, that hath no improvement of Pasturage, Tillage, or Planting, is called, as indeed it is, waste'. To farm soil was a religious compulsion, so we gave Aboriginal Australians no standing as occupants (p. 24).

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In Australia, nature has been described as being still larger than culture because of the recentness of settlement, and perhaps also because of the marked difference between the Australian environment and the mother land of the settlers (Mathews cited in Rose, 2004, p. 47). Cultural adjustment to the nature of the landscape is still occurring. The rise in popularity of studies such as environmental and cultural history are testaments to growing awareness of ecological damage that has occurred in the last 200 years (see for example Flannery, 1994, 2004; Seddon, 1994; Rose, 1996; 2004; 2005; Mulligan & Hill, 2001; Sinclair, 2001; McKenna, 2002). Yet, cultural change toward ecological sustainability might not be as quick to occur as is ecologically desirable when one considers that Australia in 2001 had the highest rate of land clearing of any developed country in the world, and was sixth highest after Brazil, Indonesia, Sudan, Zambia and Mexico (Australian Conservation Foundation, 2001). A recent independent report to the Australia federal government also implies that cultural change is needed, observing:

> Of countries containing large endowments of biodiversity, Australia is unique in another, very significant way. Of all the countries classified as megadiverse,[3] Australia is one of only two countries in the high income category. Australia as a richer, healthier, better educated country with a more developed economy is better positioned to deal with problems of environment and development than all but one other megadiverse nation—the USA. This position carries a special responsibility and implies that a high standard of biodiversity protection can be expected in Australia. It also carries with it an opportunity for world leadership (Australian State of the Environment Committee, 2001).

The *Australian State of the Environment Committee Report* (2001) compares the following socio-economic data for the 17 megadiverse countries: population, area, population density, life expectancy, income, agriculture (as percentage of output), nationally protected areas (as percentage of land area) and adult literacy rate. When one considers that of the 17 megadiverse countries Australia has the

lowest population density (2 people/km^2), highest life expectancy (78.2 years), second highest per capita income after the USA, relatively low agricultural output (3% of output), relatively low percentage of nationally protected land (7.3%) and the highest adult literacy rates (99%), it is easy to agree that Australia is in a strong position to adjust its cultural understandings of the land so that they are more ecologically sustainable. Environmental historian Rolls (2000), however, argues:

> No successful remedy can be made for any area unless we know its history; we cannot know its history without knowing how Aboriginal Australians managed the land. The greatest error of our first settlers was not in misreading the soil but in discounting Aboriginal Australians. Aboriginal Australians knew how the country functioned; after all they had spent many tens of thousands of years fashioning it to suit themselves. Unless we ask their advice instead of trying to exclude them from pastoral properties, we have little hope of curing the country. Despite science, we still lack intimate practical knowledge; governments have neither knowledge nor the will (p. 24).

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I agree with Rolls that (non-Aboriginal) Australians cannot fully 'understand' the land and develop more ecological sustainable culture(s) without paying attention to our collective histories: indigenous knowledge and relationships with the land, and the history of contact between indigenous and settlers. I am also mindful of criticisms of 'urban middle-class intellectuals' over the romanticism of Aboriginal life (Carroll, 1992), and of appropriation of Aboriginal knowledge. As Brookes (2002b) has observed, 'this is not a matter of appropriating Aboriginal knowledge but of paying attention to implicit lessons from Aboriginal cultures about how to approach questions of knowledge and place' (p. 407). The areas of cultural and environmental history have much to offer outdoor environmental education in regard to learning how to 'read' the landscape for stories of past activities that have shaped a place. Australian historian Griffiths (2003) observes that:

> Australia has a real competitive edge in the ecological humanities: in the practice of philosophy, art history, eco-criticism and environmental history. It has to do with our New World mentality and predicament, our history as a modern settler society with a long, strong indigenous history, our inheritance of a confrontingly different and unique ecology, our inhabitation of an island continent that is also a nation. Australian history is like a giant experiment in ecological crisis and management, sometimes a heartening parable of hope and learning. Ecologists working in Australia today often feel like they are ambulance drivers arriving at the scene of an accident. They want all the help they can get. Such a roller-coaster of environmental history makes us think differently and more sharply than the rest of the world on many ecological matters. On such a continent, we can never blithely assume the dominance of culture over nature, nor can we believe in the infinite resilience of the land. We are committed by history and circumstance to an intellectually innovative environmental enquiry (p. 4).

I would add to this that Australians are also 'committed by history and circumstance' to create 'intellectually innovative' educational experiences and curricula that communicate a long human presence in the landscape that has shaped what may be seen today, and in effect, contributed to the environmental attributes that were conducive to settlement.

Stories for the landscape—where might we find meaning?

> Our history is a window on our relationship with our place . . . some great advances in knowledge have come from our ability to read the past (Johnson, 1994, p. 40).

Stories for the landscape may be found in a variety of disciplines. I have found environmental history, being at the junction between natural history and human or cultural/social history, a rich place to find material about the places I take students. The stories that come from environmental history, like those from other disciplines, are not neutral or value-free. Stories about past activities and relationships with the land are a way of ascribing meaning to the natural world (Sinclair, 2001). Anthropologist Rose (2001) has observed that 'stories change the way people think' (p. 61) and Strang's (1997) account of relationships of Aboriginal people and graziers with the land in northern Queensland also demonstrates how stories shape the way people understand the land.

Although stories provide a means for interpreting past activities, a narrator's interests and values heavily influence their narratives. American environmental historian, Cronon (1992), observes that 'in the beginning was the story. Or rather: many stories, of many places, in many voices, pointing toward many ends' (p. 1347). Cronon, in reviewing two vastly different historical accounts of how the Great Plains of North America were transformed into the 'dust bowl' in the 1930s, demonstrates how different stories of the same setting can emphasise different aspects of history, that in turn may lead to quite dissimilar representations of the place and what occurred. Cronon argues that human interests and values shape the narrative of a story and give it meaning and purpose. As a narrator makes decisions about where in time to start and finish, and who is excluded or included, a story is also an expression of power: 'whatever its overt purpose, it cannot avoid a covert exercise of power: it inevitably sanctions some voices while silencing others' (p. 1350). The linear structure(s) of a story, beginning-middle-ending, are a cultural construction that may not exist outside the particular reading of a given set of events. Cronon suggests:

> If the way a narrator constructs a scene is directly related to the story that narrator tells, then this has deep implications for environmental history, which after all takes scenes of past nature as its primary object of study. If the history of the Great Plains is a progressive story about how grasslands were turned into ranches, farms, and gardens, then the end of the story requires a particular kind of scene for the ascending plot line to reach its necessary fulfillment. Just as important, the closing scene has to be different from the opening one. If the story ends in a wheatfield that is the happy conclusion of a struggle to transform the landscape, then the most basic requirement of the story is that the earlier form of that landscape must either be neutral or negative in value. It must *deserve* to be transformed (p. 1354).

Cronon goes on to highlight that the stories environmental historians tell about the past do not exist in a vacuum, and their practice is bounded by at least three ways that limit their power. First, their stories cannot 'contravene' known facts about the past. Second, their stories may not transcend the natural world and thus must make ecological sense, and, third, historians do not tell stories in isolation, they are members

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of communities that evaluate their work. This serves as a reminder of the need to be cognisant of the human element in any historical account. Sinclair (2001), an Australian environmental historian, has made similar observations in his account of the ecological and cultural transformation that the Murray River has undergone since European settlement.

> On the surface, public stories about environmental change appear less fragmentary than individual recollection. Those who have sought to explain the recent history of the Murray configure events of the past into casual sequences that order and simplify those events, give them new meanings and justify of explain change. While some scientific descriptions of physical processes can be obtuse, narratives with human actors staged on the physical landscape provide a storyline that can emphasise either folly or the triumph of human spirit, depending on the narrator's perspective on the nature of the past and the prescribed outcome (p. 138).

The junction between personal understanding, informed by experience, and larger ecological or cultural stories can at times be confusing, and the respective insights potentially in conflict. Individuals make sense of their experiences often in non-linear ways, connecting different events together in a rhizomatic manner. Sinclair observes:

> Individuals extrapolate much larger stories from specific experiences. A person may take a particular event, such as a flood, or a fishing trip where they first failed to catch a Murray cod, as symbolic of wide-ranging changes in the river. Perceptions of cumulative change are made more difficult by the processes of memory partly because the recollected past is not a consecutive temporal chain; rather it is a set of discontinuous moments lifted out of the stream of time. An individual's retrieval of memories is seldom sequential; events can be located by association rather than worked methodically forward or backward (pp. 137–138).

In a discussion about Australians developing attachments to place, Rose (2004) offers caution against an amnesia that has accompanied post-1788 settlement of Australia:

> The problem with memory is this: if we are to forget all the things that may make us uneasy, then we have to forget even to think about places where uncomfortable things happen. If we were able to do that, then we would find ourselves forgetting the losses for which we are ultimately accountable, and insulating ourselves against the absences that surround us. Worse, perhaps, we would have to forget the accountability which gives our lives moral gravity. We would have to forget who and where we really are (p. 47).

Stories, historical accounts, are not, and can never be, an 'objective' account of events. This does not render environmental histories, or any other history for that matter, 'useless' fictions, but rather serves as a reminder that any research involves an 'exercise of power'. Cronon (1992) points out that historians do not tell stories by themselves, they are members of communities that evaluate and provide feedback on their work. The stories told by individuals, communities and societies not only reflect a past(s), but also shape future(s) (Cronon, 1992). As an educator the choice of story, for me, is partly shaped by the landscape, what might be readable in the landscape, and what or who is silenced by omission.

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Stories in the landscape—stories from practice

> When a botanist enters on the investigation of so remote a country as New Holland [Australia], he finds himself as it were in a new world. He can scarcely meet with any certain fixed points from whence to draw his analogies; and even those that appear most promising, are frequently in danger of misleading, instead of informing him (James Edward Smith [1793] cited in Duyker, 2003, p. 125).

Outdoor environmental education experiences offer a significant opportunity to engage both physically with a landscape and cognitively with those who have played a role in shaping a place. Not paying attention to the history of a place is an 'exercise of power' by omission. As the environmental historian Johnson (1994) has noted, 'how we look determines what we see' (p. 46). How refers not only to the physical means, but also to the cognitive and philosophical understandings that give shape to what might be seen and understood. In this section of the paper I explore how I use historical accounts as pedagogical tools in 'reading' the landscape.[4]

Rose (2004) argues that 'settler societies are built on a dual war: a war against Nature and a war against the natives. Each has been devastating. In the USA and Australia, the evidence for dual warfare is found in written material and in the vernacular' (pp. 34–35). Many cultural and environmental historians in Australia have documented the struggle of European settlers to gain a conceptual and physical grasp on the landscape, people, flora, fauna and climate of the continent (see, for example, Carter, 1987; Lines, 1991; Bolton, 1992; Dovers, 1994; Flannery, 1994; Seddon, 1994; Sinclair, 2001; Adams, 2003; Arthur, 2003; Botterill & Fisher, 2003; Attwood, 2005; Main, 2005).

The anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner in 1968 delivered a public lecture titled 'The great Australian silence'. Stanner (cited in Manne, 2003a) argued that scholars and citizens had, to date, failed to incorporate Aboriginal dispossession and its impact into their understandings of Australian history. Stanner argued that the failure to acknowledge this tragic and complex story was no accident:

> Inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absentmindedness. It is a structural manner, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a *cult of forgetfulness* practiced on a national scale. We have been able for so long to *disremember* the aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so. [emphasis added] (cited in Manne, 2003a, p. 1)

Stanner's 'great silence' has been broken by many significant pieces of research, too numerous to list here.[5] However, despite the work of Stanner and others, there remains in Australia, at a broad cultural level, considerable reluctance to acknowledge the occupation, ownership and relationship of Aboriginal people to the land, and the subsequent impact of European settlement (Rose, 2004). Informed by Stanner's legacy, this has been described in various ways as 'practical forgetfulness' (Sinclair, 2001) and a 'cult of disremembering' (McKenna, 2002).

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While stories of contact between European settlers and the Aboriginal people are easily found in historical accounts, signs of stories *in* the landscape are often not so readily readable. In many cases, the physical place of contact carries few reminders that the land was once owned and inhabited by Aboriginal people, let alone signs of what were often brutal encounters between the indigenous and the invaders. The Murray River in south-eastern Australia, is one place where I take students where it is still possible to 'read' signs in the landscape that tell stories of past indigenous lives and activities. It is to these stories that I now turn.

Of 'oven roads' and 'practical forgetfulness'[6]—a journey down the Murray River

Prior to European invasion Aboriginal people lived in substantial numbers along what is today called the Murray River (Walker, 1983; Sinclair, 2001). Since European settlement the river and its catchment have suffered a radical decline in its ecological health (Sinclair, 2001). I have discussed elsewhere the development of outdoor environmental education pedagogical responses to the declining ecological health of the river (Stewart, 2004a, 2004b); here I wish to elaborate on an aspect of the cultural dimension of the declining health of the river.

Canoeing along the Murray River can, with careful observation, be a journey full of cultural stories. With knowledge, skill and careful attention it is possible to travel along the Murray River observing middens (ovens) (Figure 1), scar trees (from the crafting of dishes (Figure 2) and canoes (Figure 3)), boundary marker trees, and in some places stone tools and burial sites. It is easy, however, to travel the river and not pay attention to these sites, in an act of 'practical forgetfulness'.

Figure 1. A midden of mussel shell and charcoal (dark band). Image by author.

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Figure 2. Black Box tree with scar of dish. Image by author.

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Observing these artefacts provides a segue into the lives of those who have previously lived in the area and played a role in shaping the landscape, and to the relationship between settlers and the indigenous population. In rural areas along the river, for example, settlers have used the crushed charcoal and shell of large middens (ovens) to surface muddy dirt roads. When it rained, the material allowed water to drain quickly, preventing travellers from becoming bogged down (Sinclair, 2001). Middens, the site where Aboriginal people cooked and ate freshwater shellfish collected from the river, have only recently become protected by State (1972 in Victoria) and Federal (1982) law as archaeological sites. Sinclair (2001) notes:

> Since European settlement, middens have served many purposes. They've been used to construct roads and airstrips and been burned in lime kilns. In Victoria, most of the roads known to be made from middens exist on privately owned farms and in State Forests. The Victorian Forestry Commission often used middens to construct ramps leading up to bridges over creeks and rivers. Once a midden is disturbed, its stratigraphy and scientific potential are destroyed (pp. 35–36).

Figure 3. River Red Gum tree with scar of canoe. Image by author.

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Middens provide a window into the past health of the river (mussels are now inedible because of the poor state of the river), indigenous way(s) of life, and to settler responses to the original inhabitants:

> Middens hold an archaeological story within them that can be used to explain elements of past Aboriginal communities. But they also have an imaginative power to shape the stories of the present. Even after they are scattered, perhaps they can still exist as metaphors for thinking one's way into the history of the landscape (Sinclair, 2001, p. 37).

Observing middens can lead to discussion of the capacity of the river to support human life and the many uses to which it is has been put. Middens can symbolise a once healthy Murray River, providing a strong contrast with the current state of the river. Through the introduction of dams, weirs and channels, European settlement has radically reordered the ecological processes of the river, and consequently

reduced the overall health of the system. In a rhizomatic manner, the discussion of middens, and the life of those who made them, can lead one to contemplate the impact of European settlement on aspects of the river ecology such as declining native fish numbers, increasing numbers of introduced fish, declining water quality, or declining forest health on associated flood plains. To explore one rhizomatic thread for example, the Murray cod, Australia's largest native freshwater fish,[7] has been in decline for most of the twentieth century. The Murray cod was an important food source and cultural icon for indigenous people living along the river. The Murray cod is also culturally important to European settlers:

> Murray cod are repositories of meaning, at once symbolic of profound social and ecological change, while also deeply rooted in specific times and places. Murray cod are tokens of a way of life. People have fished for them because the act of catching them partially defines who they are and the lives they remember (Sinclair, 2001, p. 128).

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Murray cod have declined because of a complex set of factors such as overfishing, reduced capacity to migrate up and down the river (due to dams and weirs), de-snagging of the river, declining water quality, altered flow regimes, and competition with introduced species (Sinclair, 2001; Lintermans, 2007). The once abundant Murray cod is now nationally listed as 'vulnerable' to extinction (Lintermans, 2007). Linking stories together in a rhizomatic manner, following the observation of a midden, can connect cultural understandings and use of the river to its poor health and that of much of its natural history.

Scar trees, where Aboriginal people have removed a section of the thick bark of tree to make a carrying dish (sometimes called 'coolamon'), shield or canoe (Figures 2 and 3), are also not difficult to find when one knows where and what to look for. In a sense, scar trees act as reminders against acts of practical forgetfulness. They are another visual reminder of a culture and knowledge system deeply situational, contextual and tied to the land. Making canoes from the bark of River Red Gum trees required detailed knowledge of when and how to remove bark, how to dry and treat the bark to give it shape and how to paddle or pole the finished craft (Edwards, 1972).

Scar trees may be found close to the present course of the Murray River, but they may also be found some distance from the river. This may act as a reminder that, depending on the location, the course of the river may have changed or that prior to European settlement it flooded more frequently and extensively. In a rhizomatic manner, observation of such trees can act as a nexus in a discussion regarding the limited flooding that occurs today as a result of river regulation and resulting impacts on ecology. Much of the river and floodplain ecology has evolved relying on regular floods that 'reset ecosystem processes by promoting the recruitment of flora and fauna and by allowing the river and its floodplain to exchange resources' (Sinclair, 2001, p. 30). With less frequent and less extensive flooding, many species of flora and fauna find it difficult to reproduce. With careful observation and rhizomatic inquiry and discussion scar trees can provide a means to connect past forest and river use to current understandings and changes to the ecology and landscape.

Some stories in the landscape are not readily readable without knowledge of past activities; the Rufus River massacre is one such story. Today there is little to remind a traveller of what occurred at the junction of the Murray and Rufus Rivers in the far south-west corner of New South Wales. In the late 1830s sheep and cattle drovers (overlanders) established a route between NSW settlements and Adelaide. As the number of livestock and drovers following the route increased so did the tensions between the Aboriginal people and the overlanders. Between 1839 and 1841 the situation deteriorated dramatically with many thousands of sheep and cattle reportedly speared by Aboriginals, at least 40 Aboriginal people killed, but significantly no Europeans. This sorry tale reached its climax in 1841 when a party of Police were sent from Adelaide by Governor Grey to ensure control of the route:

> Moorhouse [the Aboriginal Protector] met with the Aborigines but was unable to broker a peace. Command was passed to Officer Shaw . . . Overlanders and police were drawn up on either side of the Rufus, and when shouting warriors advanced in semi-circular crouching rows they were caught in the gunfire between two lines of men. After intense fighting the Aborigines broke ranks; some made for the shelter of the scrub, others to the reed beds of the river. The latter were unfortunate. The white men poured a non-stop fusillade into their hide-out for fifteen minutes . . . The official estimate of Aboriginal casualties was thirty killed and ten wounded out of a force of about 150. There seemed little doubt that the scale of the operation was deliberately played down (Sinclair, 2001, p. 50).

This is a necessarily brief account of a complex and tragic story. Incidents like this occurred at many locations across the continent (Elder, 2003). I use accounts like these with students to draw attention to complex nature of the relationships between indigenous and settler culture and the landscape that shapes both. I also use other historical accounts of the contact between indigenous and invaders that demonstrate mutual respect and interest. The story of Charles Sturt (in Flannery, 1998), the first European to travel the length of the river to its mouth, is an intriguing account of diplomacy and adventure (numerous near-misses).

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Concluding remarks

These stories highlight the complex cultural-ecological changes that have occurred. Stories may be connected together in a rhizomatic manner: sites and artefacts provided a storyline to other cultural-ecological issues. There are several central roots to the story that are largely inseparable: the river, its ecology and human (indigenous and settlers) relationships and impacts. Weaving stories through an experience of the river can transform it from people-less landscape into place with a rich history and an uncertain future.

The Australian landscape is dotted with stories about the contact between indigenous and settlers, many are unmarked and, I suspect, unknowingly overlooked. These stories provide an insight into past and present relations between the original inhabitants and the occupying forces. Without attending to history of places, we run the very real risk of repeating the past: dispossessing the inhabitants (figuratively) and denying their agency in creating the attributes of the place that are likely to have

drawn us there in the first instance. There is no single history of a place: different stories reveal different values, attitudes, behaviour and impacts. Without historical stories place(s) become meaningless, featureless backdrops upon which new cultural and environmental injustices may be written. Reading the stories in a landscape and attention to historical accounts are ingredients to a place-responsive pedagogy to prevent future injustices. To return to Bill Neidjie (cited in Neidjie & Taylor, 1989):

> Listen carefully this, you can hear me.
> I'm telling you because earth just like mother
> and father or brother of you
> Your body, my body I suppose,
> I'm the same as you . . . anyone.
> Tree working when you sleeping or dream (p. 3).

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Notes

1. Estimates of the size of the indigenous population prior to European contact vary substantially: between 300,000 and 2,000,000. Rolls (2000) has conservatively estimated a population total of 1.2 million, highlighting that massive early losses due to smallpox have been underestimated because little is known of several waves that spread across the continent killing three-quarters of the population.
2. In Australia 'history wars' rage over the extent to which the indigenous people 'quietly slipped away' or were poisoned, murdered and massacred in the process of dispossession and displacement. It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail this debate due to its scale (for more detail see Attwood & Foster, 2003; Macintyre & Clark, 2003; Manne, 2003b). The maltreatment of indigenous people, however, is well documented (see for example Elder, 2003).
3. In 2000 the World Conservation Monitoring Centre identified Australia was as one of 17 megadiverse countries. 'The concept of megadiversity is based on the total number of species in a country and the degree of endemism at the species level and at higher taxonomic levels . . . Together, these 17 countries harbour more than 70% of the earth's species' (Australian State of the Environment Committee, 2001, p. 13). Other countries include: Brazil, China, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), Ecuador, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, South Africa, the USA and Venezuela.
4. The idea of reading the landscape as a 'text' is prominent in cultural geography (Stratford, 1999), but has had only passing attention in outdoor environmental education (Slattery, 2001).
5. Systematic documenting and analysis of historical accounts have become more available in the last 30–35 years. The works of Rowley (1970a, 1970b, 1970c) and Reynolds (see, for example,

1972, 1989, 1990, 2004) have been particularly significant in this process. For a more detailed description of the rise of historical accounts of Aboriginal-Euro settler contact see Robert Manne (2003a).

6. These two phrases are borrowed from Sinclair (2001).
7. Individuals have been recorded up to 1.8 m in length and weighing up to 113 kg. Their growth rates vary greatly depending on the river conditions. They are long lived, with the oldest fish recorded by scientists at 47 years old (Sinclair, 2001).

Biographical notes on contributors

Alistair Stewart is lecturer in the Centre for Excellence in Outdoor and Environmental Education, La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia. His research interests include the cultural constructions of place and their pedagogical implications for outdoor and environmental education.

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