

Playing with an unstoppable force: Paddling, river-places and outdoor education.

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a recent research study into participants' experiences of rivers through outdoor education programs that utilised paddling activities as a means of participation and travel. The study collected written and oral data from 64 participants from three undergraduate Australian university outdoor education degree courses. The major findings of the research are presented and discussed here, revealing how the participants' recollections of their experiences were dominated by the technical requirements of the activity and the cultural expectations for encountering a wild river. The paper concludes that such responses continue to be problematic for outdoor educators who hope to extend, or replace, the traditional personal and social development aims of outdoor education with a more place-responsive pedagogy.

An introduction to the research

In this paper I explore how perceptions of nature and adventure are implicated in participants' experiences of river places in outdoor education. The discussion is based on my research into the experiences of outdoor education participants from three undergraduate university degree programs on river paddling trips that were conducted in south-eastern Australia between 1995 and 2004 (through kayaking, rafting and canoeing, and in training, touring and expedition style experiences). My interpretation of data from 64 participants invites outdoor educators to consider the pedagogic significance of river places as they are encountered through paddling activities.

This is particularly relevant for two reasons. First, the research considered shifts in the discourse of outdoor education that argues an extension, or for the replacement of, the traditional aims of personal and social development with a focus on sustainable nature-relations. What might such developments in professional outdoor education discourse require in practice? What new pedagogies might be need to emerge? Second, given the perilous ecological condition of many of our rivers and current political and community debates over water resource management and river health, how might outdoor education practices on rivers contribute to a more optimistic future for both river ecologies and the communities that they sustain?

In an attempt to respond to these difficult questions I have presented this paper in three parts: (a) an introduction to the research, including its methodological orientations; (b) a presentation and discussion of the major findings of the study; and, (c) a consideration of the consequences for experiencing river places through paddling encounters. The focus

of this paper reflects the dominance of responses by participants in the study who narrated their experiences with white water rivers in terms of adventure, risk, and the desire for an encounter with the wild river. A second paper is planned, *Moving on an effortless journey: Paddling, river-places and outdoor education*, which intends to focus on participants' responses to their experiences on slow flowing sections of rivers where there were minimal or no perceived white water risks.

Payne (2002) has challenged outdoor educators to undertake a more earnest reflexive turn to critically assess the contribution and environmental appropriateness of the activities which form part of the staple diet of outdoor education programming (such as paddling, rock climbing, bush walking etc.). In recent years a number of authors have begun to research and write about the ways that students experience Australian rivers through outdoor education where paddling activities have been central to the program (see Payne, 2002; Stewart, 2004a, 2004b; Thomas and Thomas, 2000; Wattchow, 1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2003). This work has raised very interesting questions about the role of language and naming for both the activity of paddling and the river, the influence of socially constructing the river as wilderness, and the significant challenge of trying to represent or recapture the experiences of participants through written research texts. Such work has, perhaps, provided a vital first step in our understanding of the relationships between a particular adventurous activity and how it influences participants' encounters with various outdoor locations. There is much of value here in promoting a careful pedagogical consideration of outdoor education aims, practices, and its potential to make a significant contribution to the participants' education.

A phenomenological orientation to research

When I began researching outdoor education participants' experiences of river-places several years ago in an attempt to respond to the kind of questions raised above, I soon realised that very careful consideration would need to be given to issues of research methodology. Broadly speaking a phenomenological orientation to research seeks to reveal aspects of human experiences that are difficult to reveal because they remain hidden within the habits of everyday living. According to Mugerauer (1995, p. 118), Heidegger insisted that we reflect upon what is nearest, "on what is so close that we do not see or think it." A researcher who uses a phenomenological orientation embraces the subjectivities of human experience and begins, it is argued, by temporarily suspending (or bracketing) the researcher's preconceptions and theoretical assumptions about the phenomena being studied. In so doing the "meaning, structure and essence" (Patton, 2002, p. 132) of human experience, or lifeworld, of the participant is said to reveal itself (Matthews, 2002). One of the shortcomings, or realities, of this kind of research is that it cannot produce claims that can be generalised to other people or contexts. The researcher's interpretations of the data, and its representations in research texts, can only apply to a particular group of people in a particular context and time. It remains up to the reader of the research to contemplate how the findings may, or may not, apply in their own situation.

As such my research follows in the tradition of Husserl whose major contribution to twentieth century philosophy was to bring it back from abstract metaphysical speculation, to the essences of taken-for-granted experiences (Moran, 2000, p. 61). I drew upon the existential investigations of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (2000; as translated by Knell, 1978; and as critiqued by Zimmerman, 1996; and Hay, 2002) into technology, dwelling and poetics, and those of the Frenchman Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2002 edition) writings on embodiment and perception. In other words, by working within the phenomenological tradition I had the opportunity to gain insights into the influence of paddling technologies, language, cultural tradition and the role of the perception and the body in the students' experiences that it would have been difficult to reveal with other research methodologies.

The writings of these major figures in continental philosophy have subsequently informed the work of humanist geographers such as Yi Fu Tuan (1974, 1975, 1977), Edward Relph (1976, 1985, 1992) and David Seamon (1979, 1992, 2004), all of whom have made major contributions to our understanding of human subjectivity and the experience of place. Similarly, contemporary philosophers such as Edward Casey (1993, 1996, 1997) and David Abram (1996a, 1996b) have continued to work within the phenomenological

tradition of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty to advance our understanding of the lived qualities of the place experience and our ongoing reciprocity with a more-than-human world.

Why 'place'?

Despite a growing discourse in outdoor education about developing positive and sustainable relationships with nature (which has been well portrayed in the Australian Journal of Outdoor Education), many assumptions remain about outdoor places and the nature of educational experiences encountered there. Nature, the outdoor environment, the outdoor classroom, wilderness, even place are often presented as unproblematic phenomena to be learned in, about, and sometimes for. These possibly simplified conceptions of outdoor places continue despite the emergence within a broader environmental discourse of arguments suggesting that the human experience of natural places are far more complex and ambiguous (see for example, Meinig, 1979; Chambers, 1984; Soper, 1995; Soule and Lease, 1995; Cronon, 1996). Meisner (1993, p. 6) argued that, as outdoor educators, we go "out into Nature," where we "reproduce a particular idea of Nature ... that It is a thing and that It is separate from humanity."

But why should place rather than nature or wilderness, or any other term, serve as a conceptual marker for this research into the experience of participants in outdoor education? A focus on place provides ways of understanding how humans relate to particular locations. In his highly influential book *Place and Placelessness*, Relph (1976, p. 6) demonstrated how places serve as "sources of security and identity," but also how the homogenising influence of modern practices (particularly in engineering, agriculture and architecture and perhaps we should add education) can result in the experience of displacement or rootlessness. We are constantly recreating ourselves, Relph (1976) argues, and learning our place in the world, through recreating our place. Place then is participatory. There is an unavoidable reciprocity between people and places. "The word 'place' is best applied," writes Relph (1992, p. 37), "to those fragments of human environments where meanings, activities and a specific landscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other."

When Tuan (1977, p. 183) wrote that modern humans rarely establish roots and that the "experience of place is superficial" (p. 183) he was suggesting that lack of sufficient time in one place, as a result of mobility and lifestyle, ultimately makes it near impossible for a member of modern society to come to dwell, as Heidegger put it, in one place. What hope is there then for the outdoor education participant who ventures to a novel landscape for perhaps just a few

days? To begin answering this question we need turn to Relph's (1976) conceptualisation of an experiential continuum between the outsider and insider.

The outsider, according to Relph (1976, p. 52), is one who has a "largely unselfconscious attitude in which places are experienced as little more than a background or setting for activities." Outdoor recreation and education programs that promote personal development through adventure at the expense of other possible learning agendas may be risking this lack of identification with place. At this end of the place to placeless continuum, it is the experience of the activity that matters and participants are considered to be self-sufficient, requiring little or no dependence upon the local community or setting for information or resources.

At the other end of Relph's (1976) continuum, there are two levels of insidedness that depict a deeper attachment to local place. According to Relph (1976, p. 55), empathetic insidedness can be achieved through "training ourselves to see and understand places in themselves," where we become attuned to a locale's rich symbols and meanings for those whose place it is, but that also arises from one's own experience. In recent times Thomas and Thomas (2000) and Stewart (2004b) have written about outdoor education paddling programs that, perhaps, swing the pendulum towards this end of the continuum. For Relph (1976), the final and most advanced level of emplacement is the existential insider who equates with Heidegger's inhabitant that dwells within, and cares for, a place through their very being. For the existential insider place is full of significance which is experienced without the need for conscious reflective effort. It is "knowing implicitly that this place is where you belong" (Relph, 1976, p. 55).

Within the Australian context, Tredinnick (2003) recognises that a land-oriented writing has emerged in the last ten years, largely from academic sources, and he suggests that our "literature is opening to Australian geographies, their cities and wilds" (p. 45). Much of this writing has been deeply attentive to themes such as environmental responsiveness, landscape, identity and sense of place (Seddon, 1972, 1994, 1997, 2005), place attachment and belonging (Read, 1996, 2000), and indigenous attachment to place and responsibility for land (Rose, 1996, 2002, 2004; Sharp, 2002). In addition, there exists considerable discussion of the cultural responses of settlers to Australian places and the ecological consequences that followed (Newell, 2003; Read, 2000; Rose, 2004; Sinclair, 2001), the psychic and spiritual qualities of Australian places (Read, 2003; Tacey, 1995, 2000, 2003), their spatial history (Carter, 1987; Drew, 1994), their colonisation and decolonisation (Adams and Mulligan, 2003), the interactions of landscape and language (Bonyhady

and Griffiths, 2002; Seddon, 1997), and even how the concept of place itself may need to be re-imagined in the contemporary Australian setting (Cameron, 2003).

Much of this writing hints at a nostalgia for the loss of local places that are being erased by modern development. These places, once lost, cannot be recovered. "We mourn places as well as people," writes Casey (1993, p. 198). The rich mosaic of land, people, community is either swept aside and replaced by the experience of a homogenised landscape or it shifts before our gaze and beneath our feet into a different place which somehow maintains a continuity between the past, the present and the future. The fate of each place is finely balanced between these two possibilities: erasure or continuity.

In a further note of caution, Seddon (1997) asks us to consider "whose place" (p. 107) is it? He believes that the concept – a sense of place – should be applied "with caution, because it is a form of appropriation" (p. 106). Its popularity has made the concept problematic, "championed by outsiders" (Bonyhady and Griffiths, 2002, p. 9), a catch-all phrase just as likely to be deployed in mass tourism promotion and real estate development, as it is in scholarly study of people-place relationships.

For outdoor education then, with its stated commitment to experiential pedagogies and a growing interest in sustainable nature relations, research into the experience of outdoor places has the potential to reveal fresh insights into our pedagogic practices outdoors. Tying that research to the already established scholarship of place also anticipates a sensitivity to a broader discourse of resistance to the damage and destruction being done to local places though the placeless qualities of modern life, whether that be in urban, rural or remote locations.

The study

In the study I gained permission to access the reflective writings about river experiences of 64 participants, written when they were undergraduate students. My early analysis of this data was useful in terms of reacquainting myself with the stories students had told about their river and paddling experiences when they were students. It also allowed a purposeful intensity sampling (Patton, 2002) of participants to interview, and provided material used in preparation for the interviews. The time span between writing and interview varied between one and nine years for different participants. As a result of both the written and oral data transcribed from the interviews, a single case interpretation was written for each of the 21 interviewees, which represented their experiences and memories of paddling and river places during their time as an undergraduate student. These cases were

then combined and themes developed to produce a hermeneutic description of the experiences of the participants (Wattchow, 2006).

It is important to declare here that all participants were prior students of mine and that this could possibly have resulted in loyalties between myself, as researcher, and participants that introduced bias into the data and its interpretation. Alternatively, this provided my role as researcher with a detailed understanding of the places and events that were the sources of the participants' experiences and reflections.

The research developed two major and a number of minor themes, which were revealed through the consideration of over 500 extracts from the data. An extended process of data interpretation and re-interpretation, and drafting and re-drafting its representation into a descriptive text, is at the heart of hermeneutic writing within a phenomenological orientation to research (van Manen, 1997) and, in this case took several months to complete. The resulting major and minor themes were as follows.

Two major themes

Rivercraft: Relating to the development of technical knowledge, language and performance that participants' felt they needed to feel safe and comfortable on the river.

Romancing the river: Relating to a desire felt by participants to experience the wild river as immense, powerful and enduring and as a refuge from modern civilisation.

Four minor themes

River-life: Relating to the participants' experience of the river as an environmental resource that enabled travel, provided campsite locations and entertainment.

The social river: Relating to the socialisation of the group in varying river localities, particularly highlighting gender based differences in decision making as it related to possibilities for taking physical action.

Sensing a connection with river places: Relating to participants' sensory encounters with slow flowing sections of rivers that led to feeling connected to a particular river location.

Reflecting on life and river pedagogy: Relating to participant reflections upon the pedagogic and life consequences of their river experiences.

Having carefully introduced the research questions and methodological considerations that guided this research study into participants' experiences of river places through outdoor education programs, I now turn to a fuller description of the two major themes. The minor themes will be discussed in a proposed second paper.

'Playing with an unstoppable force'

In this section of the paper I discuss the two dominant themes to emerge from the research with specific reference to a particular type of river place, the white water rapid. The theme of Rivercraft reflects the dominance of participants' responses to their encounters with the river rapid at the expense of other sections of the rivers they experienced (such as flatwater, the banks, and the surrounding country). The theme of Romancing the river is dealt with here in terms of participant responses to white water but is picked up again in the second paper in relation to calm water places.

Rivercraft

Overwhelmingly, participant responses were centred upon a need to feel competent, comfortable and safe doing the activity (kayaking, canoeing or rafting) on one type of river feature, the white-water rapid. For many, the rest of the river and surrounding environments seemed to have vanished from their memories as their attention was drawn again and again to the regular encounters with the river's rapids; its obstacles, dangers and risks. As one participant put it: "I guess [that's] what you think white water rafting is – rapid after rapid after rapid" (Female participant, number 20, interview lines, 222-223).

The majority of participants wrote and spoke about these experiences in much the same way regardless of whether they were paddling a kayak, a canoe or a raft. There was one important exception with relation to the type of craft paddled. The kayak posed a specific challenge to several participants because of the perceived threat of being trapped underwater in the tight enclosures of a capsized boat. These responses were markedly different than those for other craft where it was felt that it would be easy to escape from the open canoe or raft should things not go to plan in the rapid.

Whilst it is tempting to think that this phenomenon and other responses within the theme of Rivercraft are purely matters of skill development, the research revealed how participants experienced the river as an experiential struggle of learning to become a paddler. This involved a more complex response of becoming an articulate reader of the rapid, which developed in

partnership with the techniques, skills and abilities that particular paddling technologies and sections of the river demanded.

Rivercraft, therefore, represents a “specific cultural skill” (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1999, p. 104); a way-of-being with the river that is acquired and has its fullest expression within a sub-culture of paddling, whether that be within outdoor recreation or outdoor education. It is a sub-culture that has constructed itself around a specific river feature – the rapid. Three important developmental stages were evident in the participants’ responses: the novice, the coping and the performing paddler. Each has consequences for the possibilities of a place responsive river pedagogy.

The novice

For the novice there is little memory of the detail of the view of, and ride through, the rapid. Memory of the experience is polarised around the confusing view of whitewater from the banks, with its attendant embodied responses of tension, nausea, shaking, hot flushes (“like a balloon is being blown up inside me that makes me incapable of breathing,” Female participant, Number 1, interview lines 215-216) and the adrenaline fuelled rush experienced within the rapid. The anxious or fearful participant rarely escaped from the perceived grip of the rapid, and it infiltrated all of their experiences: “I couldn’t sleep ‘cause I was so scared about what was going to happen the next day” (Male participant, number 15, interview line 50).

Some participants coped with this sense of risk and danger by taking a laconic or fatalistic “bit of a cross the fingers feeling” (Female participant, number 2, interview line 168):

It was fun for all of us, exciting and scary at the same time ... I can’t remember terribly much if we were in control but we just went with the water and where it took you and we popped out the other end. (Female participant, number 20, interview lines, 154-157).

For both the fearful and the gung-ho novice paddler, the metaphorical quality of the experience of the rapid is that of a blur. Both time and space are blurred in the convergence of rapids, risks and fears. The experience of the rapid as a blur applies equally, if not more-so, to the river as a whole, where the calmer sections of river between rapids appeared to have vanished from participants’ memories.

Coping

How does the novice paddler begin to become competent and comfortable in a place that felt so confusing and threatening? The tightness that made participants hesitate and respond too slowly in the rough water of the rapid is steadily replaced by more fluid and powerful movement patterns that anticipate the moving water and its relations to obstacles in the rapid. How does this happen? The participants’ experience of this process can best be described as coming to balance on a fine line between an increasingly specialised, technical performance and the ability to name and interpret those parts of the river relevant to that performance. This naming of parts of the river is a rational act and orientates the paddler towards a specific encounter with the river rapid, typically referred to as reading and paddling the line. This then becomes the crucial experiential structure that enables the coping paddler to begin to become comfortable with the river.

For the paddler, improving their rivercraft equates to a looking onto the rapid to identify dangers and then a line of safe passage; “first of all I look at dangers and then I look at the path that I should take” (Female participant, number 1, interview line 301). A line is charted in the mind’s eye upon the surface of the rapid to safely navigate between the dangers that have been recognised and named, such as, ‘stopper,’ ‘haystack,’ ‘strainer,’ ‘big hole,’ and so on. What to the novice was a blur has become a line, a narrow and specialised path that minimises exposure to the named hazards. To get off line; “we got a bit off centre, right at the top and so we went ... into a stopper that we ... knew we shouldn’t,” (Female participant, number 6, interview lines 195-196), is to enter a world of chaos. Thus the paddler’s body and mind become subordinated to the line - that reasoned and objectified path of safe passage from the top to the bottom of the rapid.

A vernacular language also develops for the chaos that the rapid represents beyond the line, and is based on the metaphor of being consumed by the river. Participants paddled down the ‘tongue’ at the head of the rapid and if they got off line, were then ‘sucked down,’ ‘engulfed,’ ‘swallowed,’ and ‘eaten’. When things went wrong it resulted in ‘carnage’. If they made it to the bottom of the rapid they were ‘spat out’ or ‘popped out’. This language highlights the adversarial quality of confrontation with the rapid, particularly the continuing fear of losing control to the river which comes to be perceived as a predatory, animate ‘monster’.

Almost all participants in the study whose paddling programs were largely based upon sections of rivers with fast moving water and rapids achieved this level of competency and comfort (over 12-20 days

of paddling). But it is worth emphasizing that it is this aspect of the program, developing their rivercraft, that dominated their recollections. Again, as with the novice for whom the blur of the rapid extended to include the whole river, so the line for the coping paddler who constantly faces up to new challenges extends forwards to encompass the length of the river journey; "You're on this river ... it's like looking down a tube" (Female participant, number 19, interview line 221). For the paddler learning to cope with the adventurous setting provided by the activity the rivers encountered had become a seemingly endless arena of novelty and challenge. Almost as soon as they completed one rapid they were already anxiously projecting their attention downstream to the next.

You've always got it in the back of your mind if your paddling a big flat long section on the river, that there's another white bit coming up. (Male participant, number 5, interview lines 326-327)

The river programs that resulted in these types of responses on the part of participants were multi-dimensional in their aims and objectives. The development of technical paddling skills was considered necessary and prioritised early in the programs. Later in the programs the emphasis shifted to leadership and the educational significance of river travel. Given my opening discussion about the changing values within outdoor education discourse (from personal and social development towards developing positive relationships with nature), what is at stake here for the possibilities of a place responsive pedagogy in outdoor education?

Whilst it is clear, at least for this group of participants, that this type of adventurous program continued to provide opportunities for personal development, it is also clear that simply tacking on the desire that students would develop positive relationships with nature (in this case with the river) was, in many ways, unrealistic. I would speculate, at this point, that outdoor education programs that take students to technically demanding locations, such as white water rivers, that want to promote a responsiveness to the river as a place rather than as a setting for personal development through adventure may need to consider quite different pedagogic approaches.

Performing

Only a small number of participants in the study achieved a more advanced level of rivercraft development than those discussed above. At this level the rapid no longer required a rational dismantling into a recognisable line of safe passage between named hazards. Instead, the performing paddler projected an image of themselves upon the water where the river

rapid became like a field of performance; "I'm looking at the motion of the boat coming down and ... where you need to be and what type of strokes you'll be doing" (Male participant, number 18, interview lines 102-103). The paddler felt unified with their boat and extended through the possibilities that this technique of paddling afforded, and escaped the confines of the line. For the skilful paddler, being in a rapid matched to his or her capabilities was a technologically embodied performance where the paddler existed with "the boat as a part of yourself" (Male participant, number 3 interview line 244).

The participant's body knew how to react, perform and position itself at specific points on the surface of the rapid that provided either the opportunity for safe passage, or for expressive play. The separations between mind and body, boat and water, that were the hallmark of the novice, and had just begun to merge for the coping paddler, converge completely into one smoothed-out body/boat/moving water performance. The paddler's rivercraft had become the ability to apply techniques and hydrological knowledge simultaneously and in a way that responded perfectly to what was demanded inside the world of the rapid.

Paddling is all about working with the water, feeling what the water wants you to do and responding to it. It is futile to attempt to work against the river as you are playing with an almost unstoppable force. (Male participant, number 3, letter lines 82-87)

But it remains a highly specialised, technologically embodied performance with significant consequences for the possibilities of place. We are given a salient reminder by one of the participants in this study that performance at this level is probably unattainable in most outdoor education programs: "It took ... a couple of years to get to that level" (Male participant, number 15, interview line 570).

Whilst this kind of seamless performance on the river, which resulted from large amounts of additional personal paddling on the part of the participants, significantly shifts their perception of comfort, it does not necessarily indicate a deepening of knowing the river as a place. The highly skilled paddlers here appeared to develop a great deal of knowledge about river hydrology which they acknowledged differed from river to river. However, there was little indication in the study that they developed a similar depth of knowledge about the river's history, geography, ecology or other ways that the river is encountered by non-paddlers.

The pitfalls and possibilities of rivercraft

What is indicated in these three interpretations of rivercraft (as novice, coping and performing paddlers) is the experiential structure of how the river is encountered through the adventure activity basis of river travel, its demands on paddlers' uses of technologies, and both the embodied and linguistic responses that participants made as they strove to become comfortable in the moving water rapid. Participants were so constrained by the need to become a competent paddler that the cultural and natural richness of the river places went largely unnoticed. In Relp's (1976) terminology they remained, by and large, outsiders who sought little meaning in the local history and ecology of the place itself.

It is worth speculating briefly at this point on possible alternative pedagogic strategies, although I remind the reader again that they should interpret the research presented here in terms of their own contexts. Perhaps it would be possible to more clearly differentiate parts of paddling programs that are about technical development and getting to know a river more fully or in different ways. Perhaps it would be worth ensuring that participants' technical skill levels already exceed the difficulties they are likely to encounter on a river journey. It is also worth considering having participants experience a section of river multiple times. Finally, it is almost certainly worth considering creating an atmosphere within the sub-culture of the paddling group that makes portaging rapids more acceptable. These approaches in themselves would not guarantee that participants would respond differently to the river, but they would introduce space in paddling programs for alternative content to be introduced and different experiences to be encountered.

It was clearly evident in the interviews with participants that most continued to express their passion for rivers and paddling. How is this passion to be interpreted if, as was mainly the case, the participants, were not developing a rich and detailed knowledge of the river as a place? In the place of local diversity and detail, the participants' narration of the river came through cultural constructions which saw the river described as 'immense,' 'overpowering,' 'enduring,' and 'Mother nature'. These concepts point towards a specific cultural heritage that also significantly shaped the participants' experiences of the rivers they paddled. Collectively, these responses can be characterised as romantic insofar as they echoed sentiments for wild outdoor places that were popularised in Europe in the 18th and 19th century.

Romancing the river

The broad range of responses gathered together in this major theme represents how participants romanticised the river places they experienced, and indicates the complexity and even contradictory character of this influential cultural construction of wild nature. For many of the participants in this inquiry the river seemed a place that held a strong allure, calling them to return to the outdoors. The river place had become a landscape of desire (Cronon, 1996; Heller, 1999; Soper, 1995). Desire for the citizens of liberal capitalist societies, argues Heller (1999, p. 5), is an "amalgam of individualistic, competitive, and acquisitive yearnings."

When such approaches to nature and desire meet, they give rise to an unfortunate approach to ecology. Combining an individualised and capitalistic notion of desire with an abstract and romanticised understanding of nature, we engender a movement of people who long to return to a more pristine quality of life by consuming artefacts and experiences that they deem 'natural'. (Heller, 1999, p. 5)

Romantic literature abounds with traveller's narratives set in outdoor places where nature was deliberately sought out for its health, educational and spiritual benefits (Macfarlane, 2003). What we now call the Romantic Movement was the search by European artists and writers in the 18th and 19th centuries for the sublime experience, a return to nature to rediscover meaning and a lifestyle denied, it seemed, by modern, industrialised, capitalist society. The Romantics launched the ascendancy of outdoor places as desirable destinations. The sublime experience they sought in nature refers to a heady mix of ideas that embraced temporary solitude from society, a search for self-knowledge and personal improvement, and ideals about the wilderness experience as a spiritual quest. It was the view of the crashing rapid or the exhilaration felt in the storm sweeping across the mountain that provided the celebration of nature necessary for the romantic traveller to reconsider his or her relations with the natural world. Such a response to the outdoors has been evident in Australian writing and art since European colonisation and continues to profoundly influence our attitudes, visions, and physical explorations (Horne, 2005). These kinds of responses were typical amongst the participants in this study.

I remember one time on the Mitchell River ... we had a thunderstorm come towards us, pretty much separating around us and joined back up and not a drop of rain on us. And I just remember sitting by that river and just being amazed by what was

going on around, thinking that our end was to come. Like it was going to trash us pretty much. But just the most spectacular experience that you've ever witnessed ... I think it was just ... just almost seemed supernatural. (Female participant, number 1. interview lines, 39-49)

I often refer that feeling as a sense of fear and respect ... not the sense of fear as in 'Oh my goodness I'm going to die,' but the fear that ... people relate to fearing God or fearing ... something to the point of respect. (Male participant, number 3, interview lines 129-134).

Yet, if we believe Beck (1995), in an age of ecological risk the same desires that lead people to turn back towards nature now sow the seeds of its destruction. In wanting to re-possess nature we are in the process, he argues, of destroying the very idea of nature. What then is the significance of this contemporary romancing of the river for the potential for a place-responsive outdoor education? Does the experience of the romantic river traveller that persists still in contemporary times deny the river as a place?

The desire for wild nature

Edmund Burke's famous work *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) provides an early attempt to articulate the human value of the sublime encounter with nature.

When danger or pain press too nearly, then they are incapable of giving any delight ... but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful. (p. 130)

We might consider therefore that the quest for adventure in wild nature brings fear and pleasure into partnership.

When approaching the Compressor [a rapid on the Snowy] my body was overwhelmed by anxiety, it was the first of a series of larger rapids that we could be confronted by during our journey on the Snowy River ... we all got out of our boats to scout the best path to run through the raging water. At this point in time I was struck by pure fear ... So I gathered my emotions and paddled the rapid. Once successfully getting down the rapids elation filled my body. (Female participant, number 19, report lines 49-56)

The characteristics of what is meant by fear require further qualification, as they are at the heart of the issue. Although the river is encountered as an adversary by the majority of participants in this study, that is "like a monster" (Female participant, number 19, interview line 184), this experience of fear is not one that the paddler tries to avoid. On the contrary, it was an experience that, in most cases, was deliberately sought by participants who took an elective program or decided not to portage certain rapids that were perceived as risky. In what is perhaps the first rigorous cultural history of an outdoor recreational pursuit (mountain climbing), Macfarlane (2003) traces the rise of outdoor risk taking as a relatively late development within the romantic response to nature. According to Macfarlane, it became popular for people to actively seek exposure to "pleasurable fear" (p. 73) to re-experience the intensity of life that had become dulled in modern society. Macfarlane argues that the pursuit of pleasurable fear required the wild landscape to be culturally constructed as a testing ground. For the first time the sublime vision for nature as awesome and intensely beautiful was extended to embrace the voluntary experience of danger.

Oh, anxiety. Definitely anxiety comes with that ... right on the edge ... I could come to harm here. I really can't guarantee that I'm going to be safe and I ... probably took that risk. (Female participant, number 2, interview lines 117-129).

Collectively the responses of participants in the study indicated an incredible intensity in memories of certain river experiences which may have become, as Macfarlane argues (2003), amplified over time. "Time doesn't stop or slow down when you are in danger," writes Macfarlane (2003, p. 67), but "we subject these periods of time to such intense retrospective scrutiny that we come to know them more fully, more exactly." What appeared on the surface as an educational activity with personal, social and environmental learning goals (and outdoor leadership development in the case of these programs) remains, by and large, a specific cultural expression of encountering wild places. For the participants in this study the potency of cultural constructs such as pristine nature and wilderness profoundly influenced participants' outdoor experiences. Other researchers have already reached similar conclusions with regard to the pre-conceptions of participants in relation to primary school aged children's conceptions of nature (Payne, 1998), American teenagers responses to a wilderness trip (Haluza-Delay, 2001) and Australian secondary school students experiences on an outdoor education expedition (Johnson, 2004). As outdoor educators we often expect participants in our programs to get out of their comfort zones to experience the world of risks, even when those risks are carefully managed

through technologies and safety practices. As a result, participants in adventurous outdoor programs may, if the findings of this study were shown to be indicative, continue to encounter the outdoors through the values and attitudes popularised by the romantic travellers of the 18th and 19th centuries.

For the participants in this study the message would appear to be clear. The desire to adventure in wild nature runs counter to ambitions we may hold about a place responsive outdoor pedagogy. Even so, we remain indebted to the romantics who coupled Rousseau's primitivism with Burke's search for the sublime experience and provided an 'ecological impulse' (Hay, 2002) that profoundly shifted the cultural value placed on an endangered and disappearing nature. Without the romantics it is doubtful that you would be sitting here reading about paddling, rivers and outdoor education at all.

Conclusion: Place responsive or placeless outdoor education

Our Western heritage of cultural ideas and myths about rivers (Schama, 1995) and river water (Strang, 2004) have been traced back many millennia. However, these historical accounts have mainly concerned human settlement on rivers and the cultural uses of water (as resource, as source of myth, as political tool, and as site of conflict over proprietary rights). What is of particular interest, I feel, in the research study presented here is how rivers have been experienced by outdoor education participants who visit them as itinerant adventure travellers. The cultural baggage they have carted with them to the river, whether it be in the form of the moulded plastic kayak or the desire to experience a pristine wilderness, has dramatically arranged and structured their river encounters.

The character of participant narrative accounts of the wild river might be best understood as the urge to connect to the magnitude of a larger universe, of which the river is perceived as a living example. It is a desire to encounter the world as a potent mystery that has not, and cannot, be solved by modernity. But, rather than an encounter with a particular place, it is an encounter with a kind of archetypal space - a wild, adventurous and sublime river upon which the paddler can define themselves.

"Since the 1980s" in Australia, argues Read (1996, p. 142), "most special places threatened with destruction must, to be saved, be capable of being universalised." That may be the cost he continues, "the Outsiders – the decision makers – no longer understand specific localities in relation to their specific meanings" (p. 143). This may apply for educators searching for a way to reconnect to nature just as much as it can for

wilderness conservationists, politicians and wildland managers. Such a cultural construction of outdoor places in Australia has resulted in the preservation of many wilderness rivers, forests, mountain ranges and coastlines that would otherwise have been dammed, logged or developed in some other way.

But it may now be timely to ask, what will be needed to move on from the celebration of the romantic wild river encountered by the adventurous traveller, to know and experience it as a place of local and particular meanings? And what might such a shift require of us as outdoor educators by way of developing alternative pedagogies that are more responsive to local places?

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