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the language and the people), outdoor
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CELEBRATING DIVERSITY:

LEARNING by SHARING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

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**An tìr, An Canan, 'sna Daoine (the land, the language, the people):
Outdoor Education, and an indigenous culture**

John White

I believe there to be a pressing need for those involved in outdoor adventure education to become more aware of the culture of the land in which they are educating. Environmental concerns have (rightly) become firmly established within our learning. It is my belief that a more complete understanding of the place of human beings within the environment is of paramount importance, to allow a more holistic approach to the way we use the outdoors. The recognition of an indigenous culture and language is a key theme to this approach, and the subject of this paper.

Introduction

If I walk out of my back door, and climb the stile at the corner of the garden, I can walk up my neighbours croft (small leased or owned farm or holding). At the top of the small 'cnoc' (hillock) I am onto the common grazing and can see the open hill behind. Early in the year, not yet spring, it is brown, the sodden foreground is reedy, and the hill is short heather which has not yet begun to shoot. The land is not good grazing yet bears the scars of overgrazing.

To the south however on the flank of the hill between the reed and the heather is a swathe of green, and walking closer it is easy to pick out old walls, and groups of ruined cottages. This is Graulin one of many abandoned villages in the Highlands.

I find it impossible to walk among the walls and dykes of Graulin without imagining children's voices, in spring, blending with the skylarks song. Sheep have continued using the paths first hewn then used by the families. All around are the strips and mounds of the lazybeds, the runrig fields fertilised by kelp, but all around potatoes and corn have made way for grass, reeds and heather. The more you notice the more you can

see; all over the land was once cultivated, and still around the village it is green and fertile. The poor state of the land owes much to the events of a hundred or more years ago. Ian Fraser Grigor described the 'Highland Clearances' as a 'time when, in the name of progress, and for the profit and pleasure of the few, men replaced men with sheep, and then (when sheep in their turn became a liability) turned the sheep farm into deer-forests' (Grigor 1979: 11).

The Highland Clearances have been well documented, and the interested reader could do no better than refer to the works of John Prebble or James Hunter, for honest accounts of those terrible times.

Things looked at in isolation, become isolated...

Why outdoor education should be aware of indigenous culture.?

I believe it important that an outdoor educator working in the Scottish Highlands know something of the history, and in particular the times of the clearances.

To answer 'why', it is tempting to resort to crude 'emotional speak'. We climb mountains 'because they are there', then we should know about the clearances 'because they happened'... However a more eloquent argument lies in the simple statement that almost nowhere in the Scottish Highlands, have the landscape, the culture, or the people remained unaffected by these times.

As educators we regularly have to justify an activity, and make it relevant to the living of those taking part, it is my belief that the whole environment should also be made relevant, and in a practical sense we should not isolate the environments we work in. A knowledge and

Understanding of why the land is like it is can go a long way to removing the isolation, whether it be reasons for barren hillsides, a simple explanation of some Gaelic mountain names, or a full and perhaps emotive account of events leading to today's empty glens.

More and more it is accepted and expected that we know and can inform about the flora and fauna of an area, or the rocks that make up the landscape, it is just as relevant, in terms of both curriculum education, and to give a 'sense of place' to know and inform about the villages the rocks were built from, or the 'lazybeds' (wide mounds and furrows built to improve drainage and cultivation) that the seaweed was heaped into.

Edward Ives was writing about Canadian song-making, but his thoughts are, I believe applicable to any 'act': 'No song, no performance, no act of creation can be properly understood apart from the culture or sub-culture in which it is found (1978 from McKean undated:3).

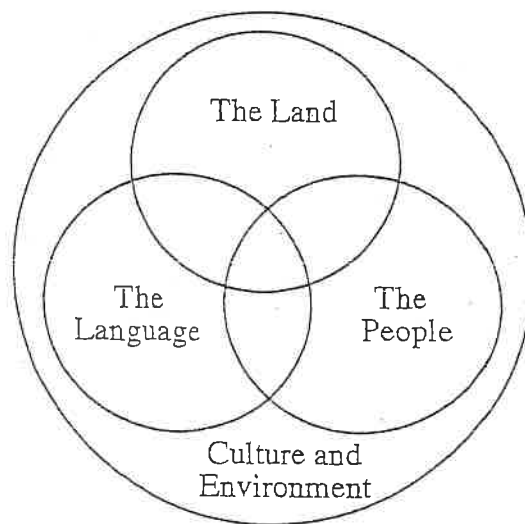
The connection between re-creation, and outdoor education is discussed by Peter Higgins (1996) in his essay on 'Connection and Consequence'. If we are to re-create, we cannot do it apart from culture.

Gavin Crichton Smith, the poet and novelist was once asked for his opinions on historians and history; 'What many people do, if they are not inside a particular culture, is choose certain facts out of an enormous number of facts and put them together in a historical fashion' (Smith from Hunter 1995:26).

This he claims is 'bad history' which Scotland has suffered from. If outdoor education is not to be 'bad education' it must at least be aware and preferably understanding of the culture it is working in.

'Gaelic' Culture.

To a Gael the connection between the land, the language and the culture is so fundamental as to need no explanation, 'An tìr, An Canan, 'sna Daoine,' the land, the language, the people, is a slogan from the Highland Land League which organised mass rent strikes, and demonstrated against the police, the military and the sheriff officers in the 1880s. The slogan, still relevant today, is used as a motto by the award winning newspaper, the West Highland Free Press. My understanding of this 'Gaelic connection' is most easily illustrated in a simple model



Relationship between The Land, the Language and the People

Whatever we believe outdoor education to be, it necessarily includes people, and land (I take land to be used in the widest sense of the word, to include sea and freshwater). The inclusion of another aspect, that of language, suggests a wider understanding. I believe we spend most of our time working in the upper circle of the 'The Land', but for a more complete and holistic education we should strive to work in the centre of all three circles.

Alexander Moffet, although talking about the environment as used by art, could easily be talking

about the environment, as used by outdoor education: 'the discovery of the Highlands meant the discovery of a rare and stupendous natural environment, not the discovery of the people who lived there'. If we are not to treat the environment in some Victorian Romantic fashion, we must be aware of the people and culture surrounding us. The 'romantic' vision, and 'realistic' vision, as described by Moffett indicates a cultural difference. He continues: "this in turn exposes the gulf between Lowland and Highland culture....Today nostalgia rules in our culture...reducing much of our cultural heritage to the pathetic level of popular kitsch. 'this Scotland is not Scotland', cried MacDiarmid as he tried to wake us from our slumber." (Moffat from Maclean and Carrell 1986:70)

As outdoor educators we must not have any romantic notion about the environment we work in, we must strive to educate within MacDiarmid's Scotland, not believe in any 'Wilderness Fallacy', (Scottish Crofters Union / Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, 1992 from Hunter 1995:165).

James Hunter (1987:2) writes 'The Highlands of tourist brochure and the holiday cottage are not however the Highlands of the crofter' I would suggest that the Highlands of the tourist brochure is not far removed from that of the outdoor educator. An understanding of indigenous culture would help address this.

My concern is that in using the outdoors purely as tool for our own agendas, we may be missing a huge wealth of knowledge and understanding. For example a 'Gaelic culture', has a huge relevance to educating in the outdoors. It is precisely because the connection between culture and land is so fundamental to the Gael, that we should ourselves try to understand it, and will really be the crux of what we can learn from the culture.

David Craig (1996:300-301), a climber, writes

in his eloquent study of rocks. 'Corries always look to me as if they should cradle cultures...I find myself looking at each prone tablet of rock or ridge in the moor and wanting them to be doorsteps or lintels of old cottages, turf dykes round crofting townships'.

Perhaps sub-consciously Craig has recognised that the glens are empty, and is reacting to MacIennans sad outcry of 'anyone who ever mattered is dead and gone' (MacIennan from Hunter, 1995:25). Craig continues the connection between land, people and outdoor pursuits, when he writes; 'The Diabeg crofts, on slopes of Alpine steepness, are no longer worked and the village has almost died...From here I can't see those dear places, but I know they are there, the ways across to them and back through time to my family's seasons there feel as tangible as the sequences of footholds and handholds which have brought me to this spot' (Craig 1996:303).

Perhaps Craig, and also we who love the landscapes we adventure in, are going part way to what I think is the belonging felt by an indigenous culture, a belonging so powerful as to remain through generations and the descendants of those who were cleared.

This power is described by Hugh MacIennan (in Hunter 1996:251) when talking about cleared Highlanders; 'always retaining wherever they might find themselves and however strongly they might identify with their countries of adoption, a sense of belonging still to those faraway places whose names alone, ...,possess, for folk of Highland origin, an almost talismanic power'.

This power, although hard to describe, I think illustrates the connection to the land that an indigenous people have, Devlin writes about the Gaelic poet Sorley Maclean, commenting; 'This sense of landscape and attachment to a place is closely bound up with human relations, not merely with personal memories of friends and their company...but with a profound awareness

of... community extended not only in place but also in time; an awareness of all those who lived and strove and were buried in the earth, not as remote figures in a history book but as part of ones own flesh and blood' (Devlin 1986 from Hunter 1998:57-58).

Peter Higgins (1996:37) argues that a crux of outdoor education is a Re-connection with the land, 'rediscovering what is there, but has become hidden under the debris of modern living'. Surely this re-connection is a part of what an indigenous culture has inherent, and manifests itself as belonging.

I might argue that this belonging negates a certain amount of activity which we as outdoor people perhaps find necessary, perhaps as an excuse to be in certain environments. A crofter has no need to climb the Cuillin, a prawn creel fisherman, little need to cross the Minch in a sea kayak. Although my two illustrations are people active in the outdoors (crofters, fishermen) I would suggest that people with a connection to the Highlands, the sons and daughters of those fishermen and crofters, have less of a need to re-connect, or even re-create, purely because they have a sense of belonging, and the climb in the Cuillin is replaced with an occasional help at the sheep fank, or even just a wander down an overgrown and disused croft.

The belonging is as much about the people as the land, Sorley Maclean was never so much interested in where you were from but who you were from. As mentioned above, re-creation is about rediscovering. But to understand a culture is more than just learning its language and history, which has the danger of treating culture as purely academic, a study of the Sami people and tourism describes the difficulty people have in recognising a culture; 'Many people who visit Sami do not have the feeling of being in the middle of an indigenous culture. Most Sami wear modern clothes, drive modern cars, and live in pre-fabricated houses. To get a taste of an 'authentic otherness' tourists have to buy pre-arranged tours, where the Sami culture is staged'

(Pedersen and Viken, 1996:82).

In the Highlands, tourists have celidhs (dances), museums and visitor centres to re-create the culture. Some examples are sure to tell an honest story, and even be educational, and help towards an understanding of a culture. I would certainly suggest some of these 'staged' tours and shows can help practically. It may be, for example, the only way a visitor will ever get to hear any Gaelic spoken. But a staged celidh is to culture, what a climbing wall is to being on a mountain, in the way that we claim the outdoors to be a powerful medium in which to educate, we should find the culture which is out there, as similarly powerful examples for our further education.

It is by design that I have used the arts in support of my argument; 'poets and writers are better historians often, than the professionals' (Smith, from Hunter 1996:26). This is in keeping with the widening of understanding I am calling for. In trying to understand a culture in more than an 'academic' fashion, we may only be able to scratch the surface from the outside. This is why I enlist the help of the poets and writers. To begin the process, I will give you a song by Mairi Nighean Iain Bhain, better known as Mairi Mhor nan Oran, or 'Big Mary of the Songs', her poetry was 'the most forceful to emerge from the land agitation of the late nineteenth century' (Maclean 1986:25), and I will ask you to imagine being in Graulin, as described in the introduction;

Nuair Bha Mi Og

...Toirt, na mo chuimhn' iomadh ni a rinn mi,
nach faigh mi 'm bann gu ceann thall mo sgeoil-
a falbh sa gheamhradh gu luaidh is bainnsean,
gun solas lainnteir ach cean an fhoid;
bhiodh oigridh ghreannmhor ri ceol is dannsa,
ach dh'fhalbh an t-am sin 's tha'n gleann fo bhron-
bha'n tobht' aig Anndra 's e lan de dh'fheanntaig
toirt' na mo chuimhne nuair bha mi og.
Nuair chuir mi cuairt air gach gleann is cruachan
far 'n robh mi suaimhneach a cullach bho,
le oigridh ghuanach tha nis air fuadach
de shliochd na tuath bha gun uail, gun gho-
na raoin 's na cluaintean fo fhraoch is luachair

Celebrating diversity learning by sharing cultural differences

far 'n tric a bhuaineadh leam sguab is dloth,
s nam faicinn sluagh agus taighean suas ann',
gu fasainn suaimhneach mar bha mi og.

When I was Young

... It reminded me of many things I had done,
some of which I shall not gather in until the end of my
days-
going to waulkings and weddings in winter,
not with lantern light but with a burning peat;
lively youngsters engaged in music and dancing then,
but that time has gone and the glen is saddened;
the ruins of Andrew's house, overgrown with nettles,
reminded me of when I was young.

When I had walked round each glen and small hill
where I had once lived without care, herding cows,
with light-hearted young people who have now been
driven away,
descendants of native folk who were free of vanity and
guile-
the fields and pastures covered in heather and rushes
where I'd often cut sheaves and small bundles of corn,
and if I were to see people there and houses built,
I would become as carefree as when I was young.

(Meek, D.E. (1997) *Mairi Mhor nan Oran*,
Glasgow; Gairm from Maclean 1986:62)
(See also Discography)

Postscript

I asked my wife, born and brought up in the
Gaelic speaking area of Kilmuir in North Skye,
what she felt was important about her culture,
she talked about land, language and people, and
she talked about music and song, but one word
was constantly repeated, in connection with
these. The word was 'respect'.

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Discography

A version of Nuair Bha Mi Og can be heard (Track 10) on the following Compact Disc / Music Cassette:

'Co..?' by Anne Martin (1998). Catalogue Numbers: WWAVECD001 (Compact Disc), WWAVEMC001 (Cassette)

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