

# **Sense and Sensibility: Reality and Romanticism in Human/ Nature Relationships**

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## **Abstract**

The use of remote locations to evoke the transformative and restorative powers of nature is both well documented and regarded as the key characteristic that differentiates Bush and Adventure therapy (BAT) from more traditional forms of therapy/counselling. But how does adventure therapy access the healing powers of nature? Drawing upon relevant literature and the voices of participants in an ongoing qualitative study this presentation explores the therapeutic potential of human/nature relationships and gains a deeper understanding of some of the conditions, attitudes and approaches may impact upon the transformational potential of wilderness experience.

## **Introduction**

The use of remote locations to evoke the transformative and restorative powers of nature is both well documented and regarded as the key characteristic that differentiates Bush and Adventure therapy (BAT) from more traditional forms of therapy/counselling (Burns, 1998; Gass, 1993; Roszak, Gomes & Kanner 1992). However, the impetus for this paper grew out of a sense of unease. Compared to some of the realities of practice, much of the human/nature literature seemed romantic and remote from my experience as a facilitator of BAT. For example, a Facilitating Wilderness Therapy student manual (Project Hahn, 2005:7) poses a hypothetical that is typical of some participant's behaviour, particularly in the early days of a program:

You come back to the campfire after setting up your tent and find participants throwing grasshoppers into the fire to watch them explode. How would you respond?

Barbequing grasshoppers, terrorising possums, defacing rocks, abusing the weather, flora and fauna are common realities within BAT yet, from my perspective, rarely discussed in the literature. Perhaps it would be fairer to say that the literature is less romantic than incomplete. Much of it focuses on outcomes and therefore does not address the kind of questions about BAT process that the grasshopper and similar incidents provoke. Such realities beg the question "How might participants with a destructive attitude to the natural environment access the therapeutic powers of nature? In pursuit of a response this paper turns first to the literature and then to the voice of participants.

Reality or Romance: Exploring the literature.

Edward O Wilson (1984) and Theodore Roszak (2001) might well argue that the question was redundant. From their perspective, humans are genetically predisposed towards a need and desire for immersion in nature. Wilson (1984) and his colleagues maintain that humans have an innate affinity for the natural world and have developed a theory about "biophilia" to explain the human "urge to affiliate with other forms of life" (Wilson, 1984 cited in Louv, 2005: 43). Whilst not universally accepted by all

biologists, Louv (2005) suggests that the theory is supported by “a decade of research that reveals how strongly and positively people respond to open, grassy landscapes, scattered strands of trees, meadows, water, winding trails, and elevated views” (p.43).

Theodore Roszak et al (1992; Roszak, 2001) explores relationships between ecology, the human psyche, and contemporary scientific insights into systems in nature. He, with colleagues Gomes and Kanner introduced the concept of ecopsychology in their publication *Ecopsychology: Restoring the earth healing the mind* in 1992 (Roszak, Gomes and Kanner, 1992). “Ecopsychology seeks to heal the fundamental alienation between the person and the natural environment and explores the relationship between our own sanity and the greater-than-human life” (Roszak, 2001: 321). Building upon the work of Carl Jung (1969) and his conception of a non-material collective unconscious that contained the evolutionary history of the human race they proffer the notion of an ‘ecological unconscious’ residing within the collective unconscious. (Roszak et al, 1992) “Just as the body has its evolutionary history and shows clear traces of various evolutionary stages so too does the psyche” (Jung, 1952 cited in Roszak, 2001:302). From Roszak’s perspective the expression of the ecological unconscious is integral to the mental health, welfare and survival of the human species.

McIntyre and Roggenbuck (1998) offer some useful insights when suggesting that experiences within a natural setting result from a transaction between people and the natural environment.

These experiences are not determined simply by nature, but instead are partially based on active cognitive processes that involve interpretation of stimuli from the environment (Leff, 1978). People to a large extent create their own experiences based upon past learning, their needs, and selective focussing (Leff, 1978). Thus the environment becomes the product of perception not the cause (Ittleson, Franck & O’Hanlon, 1976 cited in McIntyre & Roggenbuck, 1998: 405).

In simple terms, McIntyre and Roggenbuck (1998) are expressing the view that people enter natural and remote locations with preconceived ideas and expectations. As neutral as the bush may be, the personal histories and cultural values of facilitators and participants will shape and colour the character of their attitudes and behaviours within the natural environment. When asked about how the process of BAT works, a participant replied “Just the nature part of it. I had always looked at it pessimistically. After talking with [wilderness therapist] and after not being depressed anymore, I looked at it optimistically. I mean, I just hadn’t noticed the real beauty of it” (Russell, 2000:173).

If we see things not as they are but as ‘we are’ (Claxton, 1999) how then might BAT practice assist participants whose vision is blurred by anger, fear and negative self talk, to access the healing powers of nature?

#### East Meets West in BAT

Within adventure experiences the focus on nature is more likely to occur during periods of relaxation than during periods of adventure activity (McIntyre &

Roggenbuck, 1998). From the perspective of Buddhist psychology, the therapeutic qualities of bush and wilderness locations may be accessed by periodically slowing down the body and the mind to allow for the possibility of experiences of mindfulness and equilibrium Trace (2004).

Buddhist philosophy maintains that within the routine of everyday life habitual patterns of thinking and behaviour become sufficiently familiar and automatic that they may be regarded as constituting a sense self that is solid, static, permanent and, from the Buddhist perspective, a fallacy (Brazier, 2001, Trace, 2004). Within Buddhist thinking, that which we call 'self' is regarded as a convention and creation of the mind and therefore as neither fixed nor permanent. Indeed, limited and inflexible ideas of self are regarded as the root cause of suffering and unhappiness. Buddhist psychology therefore concerns itself with the breaking down of apparently solid, static and conventional notions of the self in order to generate expanded and fluid senses of self that are life enhancing and affirming (Claxton, 1999, Trace, 2004).

Like Walsh and Golins (1976 cited in McKenzie, 2003), Trace (2004) regards the unfamiliarity of the wilderness journey environment as one of the key components in the therapeutic process of change. Within this novel context participants attempt to adapt and regain their lost sense of equilibrium and efficacy, by experimenting with new skills, attitudes and behaviours (Gass, 1993; McKenzie, 2003; Priest & Gass, 1997). Luckner and Nadler (1997) explain the process as:

The individual experiences a state of disequilibrium by being placed in a novel setting and a co-operative environment while being presented with unique problem solving situations which lead to feelings of accomplishment which are augmented by processing the experience which promotes generalization and transfer to future endeavours (p.258).

Traditionally, processing of experience is done via a reflective 'debrief'. This group discussion is generally cognitive in nature and initiated and maintained by the facilitator. Without negating the power and purpose of the debrief, Trace (2004) advocates an alternative method of processing experience: the practice of 'mindfulness'. As "the most powerful 'active ingredient' of the Buddhist repertoire" (Claxton, 1999:11) mindfulness is described as:

...simply the knack of noticing without comment whatever is happening in your present experience. It involves seeing from moment to moment what the mind is up to: the endless succession of ideas and feelings and perceptions and body sensations and memories and fantasies and moods and judgements arising and passing away. Purely from this patient observation, insight arises into what is true and helpful, what is false, misguided or damaging (Claxton, 1999:111).

As potent as mindfulness may be, it is neither unusual nor mysterious (Claxton, 1997), it may occur staring at the campfire fire, or alone on a beach listening to the surf. Thus, facilitators of bush and adventure therapy with a Buddhist perspective may introduce exercises such as sitting and spending time in nature noticing thoughts and feelings within the body as they arise, or simply focussing for a while on the natural environment (Trace, 2003). From this perspective the significance of the wilderness

environment lies in its inherent ability to slow down the body, calm and open the mind and to provoke different ways of being and doing that in turn raise the possibility for broader definitions of self.

Adventure therapy can allow us to slow down the entire nervous system, access calm emotions, and form new neural networks and patterns which in turn, influence our perceptions, emotions, and cognitions...the mind slows down and looks more deeply into what is present in self and the world, and is more able to consider how to create well being (Trace, 2004:107).

To develop and integrate insights, we first slow down our thinking, habits, and strong emotions so that we can see them more clearly. Slowing down accesses a calmness and openness to seeing what is here and what is new in our immediate experience. Then we can practice looking deeply to understand self, and to generate choices regarding how best to be, and what to do and what not to do to create wellbeing (Dalai Lama, 2000 cited by Trace, 2003).

This seminal work of Trace (2003, 2004) opens up the possibility that ‘slowing down’ to nature and experiences of equilibrium are as potent in terms of fostering new and constructive senses of self as the experience of disequilibrium from challenge based activities. Within the context of a multi day wilderness therapy program therefore, a challenging rock climb that requires concentration and focus is no more valuable in terms of its ability to provoke new senses of self than the focus on the gentle rhythms of ones breath during a quiet rest on a rock, staring at the moon or other such experiences that involve no challenge, stress or move out of the comfort zone.

How might this perspective impact upon practice? If I endeavour to encourage spontaneous and facilitator initiated opportunities for quiet focus within nature, can I assume that the youths happily terrorizing animals and ripping up shrubs on Monday may be enjoying spontaneous moments of mindful focus and insight in nature by Friday? Maybe, maybe not.

### Theory Meets Practice: Some Participant Perspectives

As part of an ongoing doctoral research project 15 residents of a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre were interviewed about their experiences of relaxed quiet time during a four-day challenge-based adventure therapy program. Embedded within their responses were indications that being prepared to open up to an experience of quiet absorption in nature was as challenging and novel an experience for some as a twenty metre abseil.

Prior to admission to the Drug and Alcohol Recovery Centre, sitting by oneself, with no specific task at hand other than to “be” was, for all of the 15 interviewees, regarded as a situation to be avoided. There was an expectation that sitting with oneself would force an encounter with ones feelings and *screamin’ mind* that was likely to be negative, frightening, overwhelming and best avoided. To respect confidentiality participant names are given as pseudonyms.

*I had baggage, when you have baggage, you get disgusted with yourself, ashamed of yourself ...(sitting quietly with oneself) would give me some time to think...and you can get sucked into that reality of not good enough or trying to become somewhere else, you know, or someone else (Ben).*

Nonetheless during the course of the four-day program all participants experienced one or more significant experiences of mindfulness or intuitive knowing that was mediated by nature.

*But when you stop you've got nothing else to do but look around and see what's happening, just different colours of trees like red's because we were so far away from society it felt like everything was just bush even though when we got to see some of town and stuff like that, I couldn't give a stuff about the houses and that really, I just more concentrated on the bush. It's like they say, in society you've got to have value and belonging and (pause) something else, well I had value out there, I belonged out in the bush (Ben).*

*Yes I went down on the rocks just in front of the hut there and just looked out over Hobart I tried to put the thoughts of what I'm going through with my kids and their mother out of my head but in fact that's what I ended up basically thinking about. I didn't come up with any answers, not any answers at all, but, it was clear thinking and after coming away from there I knew inside myself basically where I stood, which is basically the same place I knew I was but I felt at ease with it, if that makes sense...a change in my attitude and the way I see the problem (Gus).*

The interviews indicate that, for people who preferred to avoid thinking and feeling, at least three conditions need to be in place in order to feel comfortable when it was ...*just dead silent and you had nothing else to concentrate on except the view and how you actually felt.* The three conditions take their title from the words of participants and are described below as: Dropping the wall, Right frame of mind and the Right to choose.

### Dropping the Wall

Most of the participants talked about the stress of *being a drug addict*. Stress was described in terms of sustained physical and emotional tension. This tension was conceptualised by some, as a defensive wall. Being able to *drop the wall* was connected for some with being able to relax sufficiently *to let nature in*.

*...it was just everything your body is taking in, you know what I mean, its, like when you, its like that wall thing again, even still not with people but when I was out there, when the wall was dropped you just noticed things more and you take everything in, the surroundings, the atmosphere with people, the noises, you know what I mean. The views and things like that, yeah. And it, oh how would you put it? ... it just takes, yeah, that's where it just took that drug addict thing away, it just flushed it all away, you know what I mean, like its replacing it with something new (Andy).*

Given that any relaxation was synonymous with a dropping of the wall, and therefore increased exposure and vulnerability, certain participants actively experimented within the group, especially on the first day, to discover whether or not the wall should be maintained or lowered.

*Just testing the water getting to know the people that were there, I guess. Like in my case, you pick up on people's body language pretty quick and you know if they're interested or not (Dan).*

*I thought well he's from the army, and I know what army blokes are like, and I was thinking, oh this is going to be a competition. Not as in a walking competition or anything like that, it's going to be going to be a battle of who done the worst thing, you know and that sort of thing. But uh, yeah, no, it didn't turn out like that (Ben).*

*Coz the first day I definitely put out feelers or 'testers', 'testers' being more the way to put it, just to gage other peoples reactions...Just because of uh, the mannerisms, how you guys spoke, you spoke to everyone as equals, not as um, "I know everything and you're going to learn this or you're going to learn that." Um, the fact that you guys came with the approach that you're walking on the journey with us, and not necessarily behind or in front of us, even although as facilitators you need to be both in front and behind, um, yeah, but yeah, I think your, your philosophies were, were "we're walking this journey with you guys and we're a part of this group" which worked out for me, it definitely helped (Jack).*

### The Right Frame of Mind

Andy suggested that having the *right frame of mind* was pre requisite to experiencing a therapeutic relationship with nature. For him at least the *right frame of mind* was associated with an enthusiasm for the landscape and the activity orientation of the program.

*Well this is something I was doing I enjoyed and I was happy to do that, you know what I mean, I was happy to go walking, bushwalking, and be out there (Dan).*

Certain other conditions may be linked to the *right frame of mind*. The data suggests that the general pace of the journey and a focus on process rather than goal was deemed important for participants to be able to relax and create their own opportunity for moments alone in nature.

*...there was no rush that was the best thing to start with, no rushing (Dan).*

*there was no rush in anything there was no, um, real pressure, you know what I mean, there was no real pressure to get anywhere, if we didn't make it we didn't make it (Andy).*

*Always in a hurry, always in a hurry to do things, like I've been for quite some years...it does build up the stress because some people can't handle it sort of thing, when you're relaxed and you're open and you don't mind what people talk about and that makes it real easy for the group to relate and to let their guards down and to know your not in any rush and just be ourselves. For some of the guys, just trying to find meself is hard enough let alone catching the extra stress (Matt).*

Having no formal *rules and regulations*, targets or other perceived performance benchmarks, participants felt free from the risk of failure and all its familiar connotations.

*Well we were basically in control, we set the pace and we made the decisions, how fast we went, what we done (Dean).*

*...you haven't got them pressures of what people think of you, all of them were dropped, gone away. So I think the body was more receptive to take it in more, yeah (Ben).*

*I was just me, and that's all I had to be, and that's, no one expected anything different of me, no one wanted anything different of me and it just actually felt good. Basically I didn't let me hair down as such but at the same time I didn't put walls up neither. Basically, like you said, there for the here and now, and took it all in two hands, loved every bit of it (Gus).*

### The Right to Choose.

It became clear from observations and interviews that whilst some participants were disposed to spontaneously seek out opportunities for 'quiet time' or 'being in nature', others were not. For individuals less inclined to 'slow down' opportunities initiated by a facilitator were the only occasions that the participant took time to simply sit quietly in the bush. Participants indicated that how a facilitator initiated an opportunity to 'slow down' and take some moments to "soak up the surroundings" was significant. Their comments infer that participants were willing to join in an experience they generally found challenging when it was presented as an invitation rather than a directive. Presented as an invitation provided participants with a Challenge by Choice (Rohnke, 1984) option that no one declined but several appreciated.

*I think what I meant by the pressure is like, you know when someone makes you do some, makes you sit down, oh, you gotta sit down now for ten ...Well that's to me when a little, that little rebellious wall comes up and says "naw, I'm not doing that" so you know, I go as far away as possible (Ben).*

Some of those experiences, that may otherwise have been avoided, were transformational.

*When we were going to have quiet time I was already to keep on ...yes, just keep on going. But once we had that quiet time, it was in that quiet time, everything just changed. I felt really, really small in the big picture. Because there's so much air and space when you look down through the valley, it's so, it's high, I'm not scared of heights but it's just like, just so small, like my problems just seem so small compared to that open spaces(Dean).*

### Discussion

This section was introduced with the question "How might participants with a destructive attitude to the natural environment access the therapeutic powers of nature?" The reading and research cited here indicate that an improved relationship with self may facilitate an enhanced relationship with the natural world. Trace (2004) suggests balancing the activity orientation of BAT with opportunities for simply sitting in nature. From the perspective of Buddhist psychology opportunities for 'being' rather than 'doing' enhance the power of the wilderness to calm the body and open the mind to new and positive experiences of self. BAT participants interviewed

in an ongoing research project affirm the therapeutic value of quiet experiences of 'being' in nature. However, they also suggest that practitioners of BAT may be wise to appreciate that the act of sitting still with oneself is for some participants a challenging activity. Like other challenging activities sitting in nature is better done when the group has attained a level of trust and security, when motivation is high and when participation is voluntary.

## Conclusion

This paper grew out of curious spirit and a desire to contribute to a body of knowledge about bush and adventure therapy that incorporates the realities of researchers and theorists with those of practitioners and participants. Collectively, McIntyre and Roggenbuck (1998), Trace (2004) and participants in the research project, vitalise my enthusiasm to continue to find discreet and creative ways of fostering human/nature relationships within my practice as a facilitator of bush and adventure therapy. I conclude with a memory of Scottie, a pseudonym for a 14-year-old participant whose attitude to nature had, on day one, much in common with the grasshopper exploding youth described earlier. Scottie threw stones at the possums, cursed the ground and yelled abuse at the rain and the *f...ing trees*. However, he soon found himself to be in the midst older men who cared for him and young girls who begged him to sing them to sleep. Throughout the program he struggled with physical and emotional challenges but did his best to adapt and to express his thoughts and feelings. One night we sat on a cliff top starrng in silence at a starry sky and a silver sea; one morning we spent a minute or two listening to the birds. By day six his growth in self-esteem was palpable. As the group struggled its way up a steep and slippery slope, he grabbed hold of a sapling and turned to me with a huge grin and said *You know what? I'm starting to like these f...ing trees!*

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