

Wilderness Journey into Social and Sacred Ecology

Peter Cock and Belinda Towns

Peter has been teaching sociology and environmental studies for over 30 years at Monash University. He teaches units in environmental politics and action, conservator society, ecotourism, wilderness studies in social and sacred ecology and ecopsychology. He is co-founder of the ecovillage Moora Moora co-operative community.

Abstract

Our paper shares the story of journeys into social and sacred ecology through a graduate university unit from the perspectives of a staff member and a student participant. We examine the meaning of 'sacred' in a natural environment and contrasts between Eurocentric perspectives on 'wilderness' and indigenous understandings of 'country'. We explore the processes used to deepen understandings of personal nature connections and their role in personal review and development. We address the connections between challenges of community development and the meaning of living a sustainable social ecology.

Introduction

This is our story of a journey into experiences of social and sacred ecology. It arises out of our acute sense of loss of community with human and the non-human world, together with the marginalisation of senses of life as sacred.

Social ecology is the study of processes of regenerating connection between people and the rest of nature. It recognises that human existence and well-being is dependent on being having significant relationships with human and non-human species. The Sacred acknowledges a spiritual understanding of the natural world however this is manifested. It is not connected to any one particular religious or spiritual tradition, but is found in encounters with 'otherness' that reach beyond oneself and within oneself. The fusion of *Social and Sacred Ecology* joins the human-centeredness of the social, the transcendence of the sacred, with the interconnectedness of the web of life.

This journey explored the relations between the participants and the many habitats of a particular place. The emphasis was on using the experience of being in wilderness and in community to bring the meaning of social and sacred ecology alive. The agenda shifted from the global to the local, from theory to experience, from the philosophical-political to the personal, and from outer work to inner work.

This journey, as part of an environmental studies masters program, emphasises the multi-dimensional human connections to nature: affective, cognitive and behavioural, and compares and contrasts Eurocentric and Indigenous understandings of the natural world. The contested nature of 'wilderness' and divergent notions of the sacred encouraged participants to partake in critical analysis and personal reflection. Wilderness is used to mean places in nature that are relatively undisturbed and where the power and voice of the rest of nature is vibrant, contrasting with places in nature that bare the powerful imprint of human reconstruction.

The journey began at the Monash University Clayton campus and moved, for 10 days of camping, to the edge of the Victorian Snowy Mountains National Park: on the Buchan River where the rivers join and farm land meets the National Park. The effects of the various human uses of the region in terms of Indigenous connection, recreation, logging, fishing and farming were addressed through orientation classes, individual explorations and observation in the field.

Before the journey a range of theoretical questions from social, ecological and spiritual discourses about wilderness and the human condition were explored as well as planning the experience. The issue of re-entry into everyday life has been singled out in the literature as a critical issue that needs to be addressed¹. As a result, there were three re-entry and debriefing classes to explore the implications for the way participants live and work.

Learning methods drew on the character of the naturoscapes, group activities and individual review and assessment tasks to generate reflexivity about the challenges of social and sacred ecology. This was achieved through workshops, simulation exercises and through spending solo time in nature. Assessment tasks began with participants in a team designing and presenting a ritual for expression of sacred ecology. The second involved developing a wilderness experience program in terms of a 'social ecology and the sacred' guide for the region. Keeping a journal was a basic part of recording their experience. This was then drawn upon to write a short essay reviewing the social ecology of the experience and an oral presentation reviewing this in the context of the literature on wilderness experience. Finally a larger essay as required that explored the implications of the experience for the way participants live and work. Students were also encouraged to be involved in community-based activities that reflected the aim of living and working sustainably.

Having laid out our intention we now share one participant's story of their experience. It is a story of 10 days in the wilderness exploring the meanings of social and sacred ecology and how it changed a life.

We left the last of our three orientation classes excited, we had a lot of work to do and the time to leave was drawing near.

On day one we were tired and excited we drove five hours to our camp site. The first time we visited our camping place we climbed through the fence without speaking in a ritual of leaving something behind us. I left behind my intolerance; I needed to be less judgmental and to accept our differences as we lived together. Our space was nestled between the rocks and the river (flooded when the river was high, and therefore a transitional space); it was adjacent to a cattle farm and on the Buchan River, opposite the Snowy River National Park.

Once at our site we gave thanks for the shelter it would provide us. I was grateful to our place, even though I thought it was too small, and when we started discussing which trees to knock down I was quite surprised. I hadn't considered killing trees as the second thing we would do together in this site. This promoted our first discussion about honouring nature versus being precious about it. We discussed the ecological impact of cutting down one or two trees and the impact that we would have on the site over the next 10 days. We would need firewood, a place to bury our organic waste, and we would interrupt the flow of the flora and fauna for a while. We also put this into context with being on a flood plain and therefore this space was

¹ R. Greenway, (1995), *The Wilderness Effect and Ecopsychology*, in T. Roszak, M, Gomes. & A, Kanner. (eds.) *Ecopsychology: restoring the earth, healing the mind*. Sierra Club, San Francisco

familiar with constant change. It was difficult for me because I was worried that by cutting down a couple of small trees we were opening the floodgate to other impacts and changes to nature – and where would it all end? The other part of me (ever practical) said oh let's get on with it then I'm tired and we're getting wet while we stand here without shelter discussing it. I tend to be a person of action rather than reflection, and this was another challenge I was going to face in the coming days as I spent time alone with nature and also learnt to work along with the pace of others.

On day two most of our time was consumed with establishing our site and our community and we didn't establish our daily routine until day three. Our routine consisted of: exercise, solo time, breakfast, community gathering, and thoughts and readings for the day. After lunch we had community work and play with the landscape followed by personal time, dinner, fire circle, and then music, singing, drumming and dancing. Our daily program finished at 10:30 pm.

By having one hour of solo time each day and space to think and reflect we gave ourselves the opportunity to increase our value to the community. This was particularly true for me; without that time away from the community I had no real sense of myself as an individual. As the camp went on I looked forward to my solo time. I also became more aware of the nature around me, particularly after listening to others' stories of their interactions with nature.

In our community gathering time we would go round the circle to give everyone a chance to share. Issues shared in the group included: how we were feeling about the space we had chosen to camp, what had happened (or not happened) during our solo time, how could we minimise our impact on our camp site and any other thoughts that we wanted to share. The aim of the process was to keep the group informed about 'where we were at', and to ensure that we dealt with any issues that might have stopped us from moving on. One day a member was having difficulty living up to his responsibility to the group and felt that he was under qualified and overtaxed. It was very difficult from him to admit this and for me it reassured that we could ask for help and the group would still support us. This was very important to me as head cook, as sometimes I found the responsibility of keeping 10 people healthy for 10 days without adequate refrigeration, storage, or supplies quite challenging. I found these community sessions enlightening and intimidating at the same time. I could say what I felt about myself, but did not feel comfortable enough to discuss issues such as unfair work loads. However, most issues were dealt with adequately as a group so that we could move on with the day. If we had have been there for more than 10 days, this might not have been the case and we would have experienced greater discomfort and session that were more emotional.

Also on day three we began with the first of our explorations into the ecological history of the region. We discussed the meaning of 'country' and what it means to have 'roots' and a sense of 'place'. In the afternoon we took a visit to Clogg's Cave, which had been a home to Aboriginal Australians for hundreds of years. We climbed down the cliff in silence, to the cave opening. The entrance was locked and we were shut out. After sitting at the cave opening, some members left an offering and then we all found a place to reflect on the cave and its previous inhabitants. When we regrouped to discuss them we reached a new level of intimacy. Some had seen themselves living in the cave: an old man, a boy, and a young woman. What did they feel and think back then; what do we feel and think now – and how does this reflect on our own lives? A man coming to terms with aging; a boy wanting to grow up; and a woman wanting to become a mother away from the artificial environment of the city. Me, being sorry and grateful at the same time. Sorry for being part of a race that destroyed an entire way of life, and grateful that I can live in this beautiful country.



Clogg's Cave (Belinda Towns, 2003)

On day four we continued the story of the landscapes' history by visiting a lead mine as well as a cattle farm. In the morning we discussed white settlement and the concept of treating nature as a resource. We learned about land use and management, about how to work with the land and vegetation to minimise soil erosion and keep the cattle healthy. We planted a tree at the farm before we left, digging the clay soil and crumbling it with our hands to give the roots room to grow.



Planting the tree (Belinda Towns, 2003)

Every day we learnt about historical and current relationships to this place, but as we were forming our own relationship with it, we were learning something about ourselves as well. I was learning to let go: to let others take responsibility and to just sit and enjoy and observe what was going on around me.

On day five we had a much needed day of play and paddled our boats up the river, along the gorge, stopping off where we could to look at the pebbles and paddle our feet in the river.



The George (Michael Shiell, 2003)

The Gorge (Kate Rigby, April, 2003)

*Adrift on a river of ash
Clasped between fingers of rock
Pock-marked faces blink and glare
Under a weighted sky*

Time out of time

*We pass in silence
But for the lambent splash of an oar;
The water, murky and chill,
Urges us back downstream,*

*While up above, a mesh of tightly woven trees
Spared, this time, the hungry blaze
Whispers of long ago*

*Here now, almost,
here again...*

*In the passage of rafts
Through a slow gorge*

*In a pair of unblinking lizard eyes
In kingfisher dive and platypus splash*

In the murmur of water on stone

*

*The forked ones make their way up river
Skirting rocks
Keeping watch
Gladdened when steely grey gives way to blue
In blessing, so they say*

*Yet they are strangers still
And still the water, rocks and trees
Hold close the depths*

Time out of time

*Beneath a river of light
Drumbeat burns and flames dance high
Song takes flight on wings of bats
Words dissolve in rapids' roar*

*And nearby
In the distance*

*The rock face
Makes reply.*

We needed that day of fun and relaxing activity as tomorrow was the Big Day. Day six was our 24 hours of solo time and for many of us was the highlight of the week. We discussed what should be packed and how we should prepare. No-one took a tent or erected a tarpaulin as a roof. We took no food and there would be no fire for warmth. We each took a candle, a match, water, and a 'community stone' that represented our group.

Before we set off we took it in turn being the recipient of gifts from others. Individually we each became the focus for the group as others paid a compliment or set a personal challenge to assist personal growth. These gifts of challenges provided further material for reflection in solo time. How could I honour my needs better? How could I open up more with people? That would mean being vulnerable to being hurt; being able to be knocked off my perch, or being looked down upon. It would mean exposing the real me; what if no-one liked the real me?

Some took reading on their solo, but I took no such 'distraction' just my journal. I felt exposed and vulnerable, alone with my feelings, alone in nature.

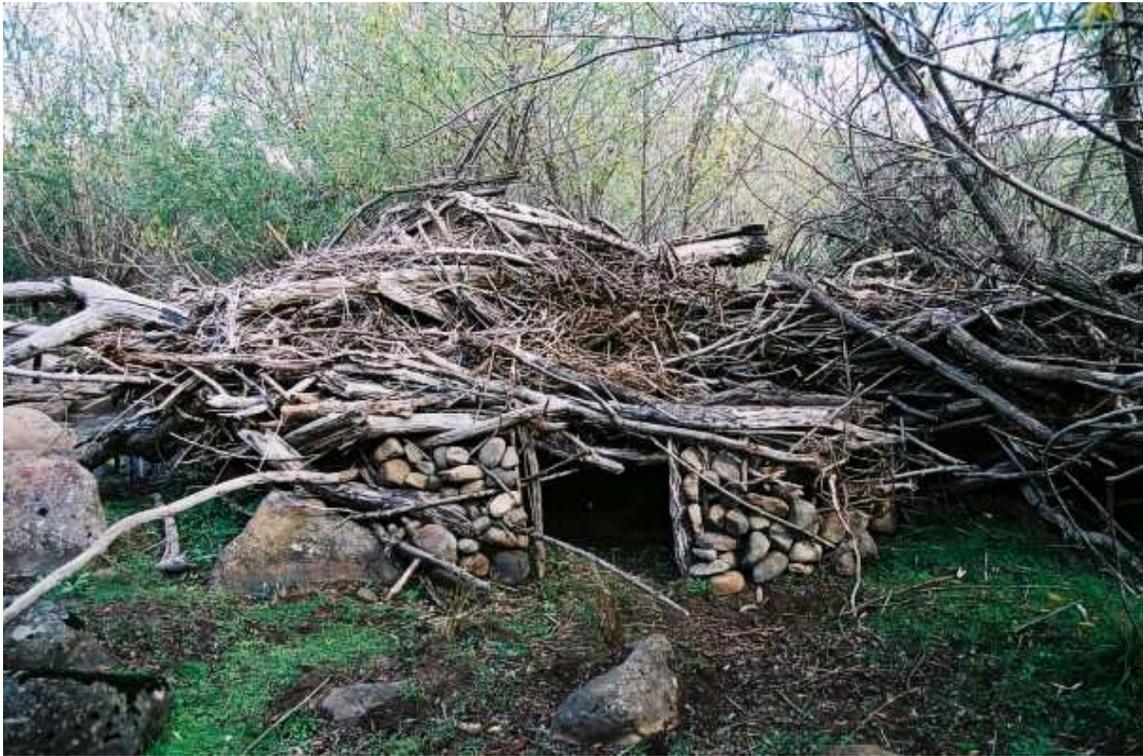
The next day the beat of the drum accompanied our return from the solo. We walked into camp with a greater sense of introspection and purpose. We shared our experiences and read from our journals. The first member to share did not hold back and gave some of us the permission we needed to be open about our experiences. As I was sharing our next visitor arrived: an ecopsychologist.

The return from our solos and Susan's presence was the beginning of a change of focus. We became more inwardly focused – looking closely at our own relationships with nature, rather than others' relationships through history. Susan helped us interpret our solo experiences and talked to us about our 'inner soils' or social self; about building up what's right with ourselves; aligning life through our senses; acknowledging our elemental forces and managing them with compassion; and being porous to experiences and open to penetration by nature.

On the morning of the eighth day we visited our solo spaces for the last time alone and said goodbye. The afternoon was spent visiting each other's solo places and walking to the Snowy River. One by one each team member introduced his or her solo space and welcomed the group to their space. There was pride as they described their site and why they had chosen it. The site reflected our journeys and personalities: a young man at the beginning of a career, still holding on to the blanket of academic credentials and not yet ready to rely on his personal strengths and achievements in the professional world. His space was on a high ledge – safety on one side and an abyss on the other. Mine was the most nurturing of the solo spaces – me who had to learn to nurture and take care of herself had chosen the most luxurious place on the first day – my emperor's bed as I called it. A large circle of sand among river rocks, comfortable and safe. The one member of our community who did not cope well with the solo experience, who felt too raw, exposed and under prepared, had built himself a beautiful shelter of river rocks and wood. He was the only one of us who had a visit from an animal in the night; a deer that poked its head in – curious to see what was hidden.



My Emperor's Bed (Belinda Towns, 2003)



A Beautiful Shelter (Michael Shiell, 2003)

Our last full day was spent cleaning the site and preparing to leave. The entire day felt strange, exciting and unsettling. We had begun to move back into our everyday lives and we would soon be saying goodbye to our community, routines and home as well.

Our final day was exciting and sad. We conducted a farewell ritual. We walked out of our place slowly and without speech. We heard the water running over the rocks for the last time, conscious that it had become a comforting background sound. I was sad to be leaving; I had come to consider our time on the Buchan as 'reality', and was not sure how I would react to a life of partial realities.

On the way home we all marvelled at how well attuned we had become to our place and our lifestyle in 10 days. We stopped at a pub for dinner on the way home and felt that others were outsiders to our community, and we were outsiders to theirs.

There were three re-entry classes in the six weeks following our journey. In the first class we completed some of the leaving rituals that we hadn't had time for and then took it in turn discussing what we experienced and how we felt about re-entering our lives. Most of us felt displaced and uneasy for a few days.

Our second class back was called significant other night. We all brought with us one of our significant others: partners, sisters, brothers, and friends. We took them through our journey, read to them, asked them to share their responses and then we took them to dinner. Many of our guests felt honoured that they had been invited to share in our experiences.

Our final class was a BBQ at a participant's house in the suburbs, where we sat around a fire and discussed our final assignment, which was about how we see the experience affecting our lives and what has changed. Then we had a feedback session about what we thought of the course and any

recommendations for future journeys. Most of our feedback centred on shared themes: some gained deeper personal inspiration and insight, some courage to pursue new relationships and career paths; others gained independence and lessened their need to look to others for validation and approval. Most gained a better insight into our connection with nature, our context within a community and a desire to spend more time in nature, just 'being'.

For me, the real gift was an ability to grow up and finding meaning in my own life. It is amazing how easy it is to avoid getting to know one's self; and the fear when we know we have to spend time alone: just our own thoughts and feelings. I learnt that growing up is about not being afraid of this. And I learnt another aspect of self-awareness: that to be vulnerable to others is to be strong within oneself.

Some Questions Asked, Challenges Faced, and Lessons Learned

We have shared Belinda's story in particular to illustrate a sense of the shared journey while knowing that each participant's was unique. There is a large body of research into the effects of wilderness experiences, which point to the changing perceptions of participants in the field in terms of person and community²³⁴⁵. A wilderness field trip provides opportunities for new views and understandings of the natural world to be presented⁶. It offers a strong contrast to the city environment to allow participants to reflect on techno-industrial society and their participation in it from a distance. It also allows participants to regain a sense of connection with nature in ways that foster an appreciation of the web of life and humanity's place within it⁷. **It is a journey that connects with our indigenous roots and is part of regenerating multi dimensional exploration of being in natures places. (footnote 8, 9)**

The journey confronted us with questions such as: who am I and what values am I accountable too? What is my voice and how is it part of a larger chorus? What are my responsibilities to the non-human world and what role do they play in my well being? How do we express honour, and create rituals to open doors to deepen meaning, enhance everyday life and look in more ways than straight ahead? A simple example of this was that before we ate we ritualised being mindful of the gift to our life, of the life we were about to eat.

This practicum provides an opportunity to review and reflect on the effect of environmental devastation and the accompanying disconnection from nature at a personal and social level. This unit offered an opportunity to take part in and evaluate the experience of a small community of participants in a wilderness location in terms of the social structures and practices, their relationship to place, the impact on the local environment, and the rituals that evolved to honour that place. Integrating these issues in the wilderness context provided participants with a

² R. Greenway, (1995), *The Wilderness Effect and Ecopsychology*, in T, Roszak, M, Gomes. & A, Kanner. (eds.) *Ecopsychology: restoring the earth, healing the mind*. Sierra Club, San Francisco

³ P. Hallen, (2000), *Ecofeminism Goes Bush*, *The Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, Spring 5, pp150-166

⁴ F. Segal, (1997), *Ecopsychology and the Uses of Wilderness*, *Ecopsychology-On-Line*, www.csuhayward.edu/ALSS/ECO/1097/segal

⁵ R. Fox, (1999), *Enhancing Spiritual Experience in Adventure Programs*, in J, Miles, & S, Priest. (eds.) *Adventure Programming*, State College, PA, Venture Publishing, Inc.

⁶ R. Haluza-Delay, (2000), *Green Fire and Religious Spirit*, *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 23:3, pp143-149

⁷ L. Stringer, & L. McAvoy, (1992), *The Need for Something Different: Spirituality and Wilderness Adventure*, *Journal of Experiential Education*, 15:1, pp13-20

practical understanding of diverse ecological processes; it gave them first hand experience of the tools required for minimising humanity's destructive impact in the planet; and it offered opportunities for learning about ways to restore the health, diversity and complexity of both ecological and human communities. It explored the relationships between the participants and the many habitats of a particular place. It outlined practices that can be regenerating for both personal and community development.

The elements of the experience came together to work wonderfully well, most of the time. They enabled us to experience ourselves as part of nature, relearning survival skills for meeting real needs and in the process working with drawing out of the experiences senses of what is precious, sacred. Such as, the sacred in everyday life which, like an Indigenous midden, is built up over time and comes to honour everyday living in community and nature.

We had fun in letting go and in ritualising celebrations and learning day-to-day ways of caring for community and self. This involved a process of moving through tolerance\intolerance of each other, to acceptance of difference towards real affection; a process of being by the river of each person's experience and a shared one of giving thanks and being of service.

We endeavoured to engender a nature connection without it being a risky exposure. We worked to be conscious of our ecological footprint without being too precious about it. Above all, we listened to and observed other nature's life and our relationships with it and reflected on its lessons for our well-being. The experience called us to honour others' ways of being as a vehicle for reviewing our becoming pathways.

Something spiritual happened: A feeling of being blessed, being in tune, hearing other voices, a sense of magic, and of synergy.

*Disturbed by clashes of country,
rural, wild, urban; fast and slow.*

*Blessed by country,
community; human and other.*

More than paradise, better than Eden.

*Amazed and awake, with bodies resilient,
clearer of mind, and deeper of heart.*

Moments in touch with the infinite.

8. Stewart, A. (2003). Encountering landscapes: an exploration of environment specific learning on an extended journey. In B. Humberstone, H. Brown & K. Richards (Eds.),

9. Stewart, A. (2003). Reinvigorating our love of our home range: Exploring the connections between sense of place and outdoor education. Australian Journal of Outdoor Education, 7(2), 17-24.