

A 'Missing Link' in Outdoor Recreation Education: Probing the Disconnect with Nature

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Abstract

Holism recognizes and emphasizes the interconnectedness of all entities. This paper examines the manner in which some outdoor recreation curricula perpetuate the disconnection between humans and Nature. The roots of this disconnect are deep-seated in the development of the human consciousness which has exalted life and vilified death. Death is a fundamental, yet often neglected element in fostering an appreciation for Nature. Discussion focuses on the potential for outdoor recreation education and the activity of hunting as means by which reconnection may occur. Educators are encouraged to seize “teachable moments” which permit the incorporation of death into environmental curricula and thereby foster a holistic view of Nature.

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Environmental educators are sometimes afforded extraordinary glimpses into the human condition. This essay was prompted by rather circuitous circumstances while conducting an outdoor laboratory with a second year university class. During the laboratory one of the students heard a sound coming from a nearby bush and decided to investigate. Much to her dismay, the noise came from a dying fawn, which had appeared to have a broken back. While, this was certainly an unfortunate occurrence for the fawn, I found the horrified, near frantic reaction of some students to be equally upsetting.

The incident prompted critical questioning of curricula and the larger socio-political context in which educational systems are posited. This essay starts by examining the orientation of outdoor recreation curriculum at the university level from a holistic perspective. The potential to perpetuate disconnection between humans and the natural environment leads the author to explore historical developments and forces shaping the socio-political context in which educational systems are embedded. The potential for outdoor recreation education and the activity of hunting to offer a means of reconnection are discussed.

As a starting point, it is necessary to clearly establish the link between outdoor recreation and the natural environment. Outdoor recreation is understood to involve voluntary participation in an outdoor activity that emphasizes interaction with the natural environment (Sessoms, 1984; Ibrahim & Cordes, 2002). According to Jensen (1995) key objectives of outdoor recreation include: appreciating nature, gaining personal satisfaction and enjoyment, enhancing physiological fitness, forming positive behavior patterns, and developing a sense of stewardship (Jensen, 1995). Intention therefore is the quintessential criterion in defining outdoor recreation. An individual, to be defined as

participating in outdoor recreation, must primarily intend to appreciate Nature. By extension, educational institutions offering such programs ought to assist in fostering this goal.

Common usage of the term ‘appreciation of Nature’ is gleaned from the Oxford English Dictionary. The word “appreciate”, as a verb, means to “value greatly, be grateful. 2 enjoy intelligently” (Pollard, 1994, p. 35). The definition of Nature, a noun, is “1 (often Nature) the world with all its features and living things; the physical power that produces these” (Pollard, 1994, p. 538). Our understanding and interpretation of the term Nature has changed considerably. While the Cartesian System of Descartes and long-enduring tradition of reductionism remains strong, systems theory and the concept of holism more recently provide the foundation for an integrative perspective. Holism was brought into the philosophical and educational lexicon by Jan Christian Smuts in the early 1920s’ (Savory, 1988). Instead of attempting to reduce Nature to basic components, Smuts asserted that “we are indeed one with Nature, ... her genetic fibers run through all our being; our physical organs connect us with millions of years of her history; our minds are full of immemorial paths of pre-human experience” (as cited in Savory, 1988, p. 26-27). The term “appreciation of Nature” is employed in this paper to convey a great value placed on the relationship with the world (all of its features and living things in a holistic manner) by a person.

When nearing the completion of my undergraduate education, I found it curious that the goal of appreciating Nature was only stated (explicitly and/or implicitly) in the descriptions of four of forty possible “outdoor recreation” courses. Of the four courses that in some way dealt with the appreciation of Nature, only one – “Environmental

Issues” – adopted a holistic perspective. I initially thought this was an institutional shortcoming. My subsequent experience as an instructor has revealed that this shortcoming is not restricted to any one institution. Rather, it is a symptom of a larger problem which is owned collectively by modern humans.

The human consciousness purportedly dawned at the end of the Pleistocene epoch. Read contends that “visual images preceded ideas in the development of human consciousness” (as cited in Gray, 1993, p. 5). Icons in plastic form, such as paintings or drawings, were often used to represent wildlife. A second theory about human consciousness is the evolutionary approach, taken by Charles Lumsden and E. O. Wilson. Gray (1993, p. 9) summarizes their approach in writing that:

A unique coevolution of genetic change and cultural history created the mind and then propelled the growth of the brain ... at a rate unprecedented for any organism in the history of life.

Regardless of the explanation, the development of human consciousness was a foundation for modern human life and society. Both the beginning of food production and the domestication of plants and animals marked monumental occurrences. Originally, human societies were, like all animal populations, “... subject to the laws of biological equilibrium” (Vidal-Naquet, 1992, p. 38). Through the adaptations of their techniques and technologies human have gradually liberated themselves from environmental constraints, to the point where technological advances have become responsible for substantial population growth (Vidal-Naquet, 1992). Herein lies the collective problem of modern humans. *Homo sapiens sapiens* – modern humans – are no longer directly dependent on their natural environment (Gray, 1993). Advanced

technological mechanisms delay environmental repercussions, thus creating a rift between humans and Nature.

The recent disjuncture between human actions and immediate environmental repercussions has altered the balance of Nature. The term “balance of Nature”, according to Howard (1984, p. 469), refers to:

... the complex interplay of birth and death of all organisms. It is the web of relationships among the population densities of the diverse species of organisms that make up an ecological community.

The obvious problem with the balance of Nature is that humans as a species have become too successful. At the root of this ecological disequilibrium is the high degree of death control achieved by the medical community and public health during the last century (Howard, 1984). This has drastically altered the perspective of some humans. Howard observes that “not only has the human race adopted the philosophy that it is obscene to die, but we are interfering with the balance of Nature by considering it unnatural for wildlife to die” (Howard, 1984, p. 471). Wildlife is Howard’s specific orientation; however, humans extend the reverence of life to plants as well.

Modern humans deny the homeostatic properties of Nature by exalting life and vilifying death. The result of such a distorted reality is that the term “balance of Nature” is often translated into fictitious, strident rhetoric. The emotional arena in which the term operates increases individuals’ inability to disregard their preconceptions of such a perspective. Supporters of the fictitious model champion a “natural” solution to present ecological problems; however, Howard (1984, p. 470) explains that:

... this “man must not meddle with nature” philosophy should be dispelled because “leaving it to nature” after man has altered the environment seldom provides a wise solution to ecological or biological problems.

The question, then, becomes one of how modern humans may rectify the fictitious “balance of Nature” perspective.

Many university programs exhibit the major symptom of the collective modern human problem: a philosophical approach based on a fictional balance of Nature.

Although “environmental issues” courses often pay lip service to a myriad of philosophical orientations and attitudes towards Nature; few actually reflect a holistic perspective. Particularly vexing is the absence of reference to the integral function and importance of natural death. This carryover is logical, detrimental, and yet rectifiable.

Outdoor recreation education and activities are ways to free individuals from humanity’s philosophical horror or shunning of death, and therefore moving towards a more holistic understanding of the world. Paramount to individuals’ emancipation is the previously-investigated term, “appreciation of Nature”.

Appreciating Nature involves an individual who intends to value greatly his/her relationship with the world, with all of its features and living things. Two important assumptions are implicit in the above statement. First, only modern humans can think abstractly. Second, death is a fundamental part of life and Nature. The first assumption juxtaposes modern humans with both their ancestors and animals, because modern humans harbor the unique mental capacity to think abstractly, and can thus perceive themselves as part of a larger system. While, on the one hand, this is what enables humans to appreciate Nature, it is also the driving force behind our collective divorce

from natural equilibrium. Knowledge and fear of death has resulted in attempts to prevent death by any measure. Vaux emphasizes that man is "...unique is knowing that he will die" (1978, p. 55). Anthropologists from Levis-Strauss to Margaret Mead agree that the fear of human death and repulsion of killing fellow humans is universal and intensifying with technological progress (Vaux, 1978). The second assumption is supported by Clarke. He writes that "any concept of life that does not comprehend the whole organic cycle is inadequate" (Clarke, 1958, p. 422). Furthermore, Clarke points out that "death is a fundamental part of life" (1958, p. 422). Appreciating Nature and the centrality of death in Nature is fundamental to a holistic world view.

It is essential, if one is to appreciation Nature, to understand the "balance of Nature". Nature is harsh and cruel, in that it is indifferent to any one species' desire to live. Howard observes that in Nature, "every organism lives off other organisms and, in turn, is eventually eaten" (1984, p. 472). Furthermore, the death of wildlife and plants is rarely pleasant or "humane". Habitats are often altered by humans forcing wildlife to adapt. If a species lacks the genetic plasticity for adaptation it is eliminated. Appreciation of Nature therefore is hinged on the realization that death is an integral part of the "balance of Nature".

Outdoor recreation curriculum can and should disseminate the notion that understanding death is essential in order to reconnect modern humans with the Earth. Such a philosophical orientation to Nature as a whole is put forward by "deep" ecologists. Fritjof Capra writes that "this newly emerging paradigm can be described in various ways. It may be called a holistic worldview, emphasizing the whole rather than the parts. It may also be called an ecological worldview, using the term 'ecological' in

the sense of deep ecology” (1995, p. 29). Arne Naess (1995a), the founder of deep ecology, characterizes the deep ecology movement as an approach which emphasizes relationships and biospherical egalitarianism, symbiosis, complexity, anti-class posture, reduced pollution, and greater decentralization. The importance of this movement is that it stems from a holistic world view, recognizes the intrinsic value of all life, and begins to develop a non-anthropocentric system of ethics (Capra, 1995).

Although the phrase “deep ecology” has become popular, the philosophy remains surrounded by much controversy. The general thrust of the movement has been accepted, but the basic tenet denying the primacy of human values remains controversial. In the final analysis, Naess contends that “the main conclusion to be drawn is moderately encouraging: there are views of the human/nature relationship, widely accepted among established experts responsible for environmental decisions, which require a pervasive, substantial change of present policies in favor of our ‘living’ planet, and these views are held not only on the basis of shortsighted human interest” (1995b, p. 83). The “deep ecology” philosophical orientation indicates a move to more biocentric ideals which fosters a holistic appreciation of Nature. A gap remains, unfortunately, between espousing philosophical rhetoric and earnestly intending to appreciate Nature.

How can outdoor recreation provide a viable means to bridge the gap between modern humans and the environment? Ironically, it is death – the part of Nature that receives so little current currency – that provides opportunities.

Hunting is an outdoor recreation activity that may serve as a reconnecting vehicle. The importance and meaning placed on the act of hunting, pursuing wildlife for food and/or sport, has largely changed emphasis with human evolution (Hummell 1994). The

term hunting, as used in this paper, largely follows the ideas of Aldo Leopold. In this tradition Loftin observes that “legal and ethical hunting which tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community is good according to pragmatic ethical principles” (1984, p. 249). As Clarke notes, “cruelty, or the willful infliction of pain, is no part of the purpose of hunting” (1958, p. 425). The concept of “commercial” or “trophy” hunting likewise is not associated with use of the term in this paper. The ultimate source of ethics is self-restraint, which, according to Leopold, fosters appreciative and protective attitudes (Loftin, 1984). Hunting remains, Clarke contends, “as it was in the beginning, completely assimilated to the basic processes of organic nature, in which death and life spring from each other” (1958, p. 426).

The intellectual heritage of hunting is tied to the conservation movement which gained a strong political voice at the start of the twentieth century when Franklin D. Roosevelt became president of the United States. A noted outdoor enthusiast and conservationist, he implemented immediate conservation efforts, such as the creation of the first wildlife refuge, the designation of migratory birds as a federal responsibility, and the passing of the Federal Tariff Act, which prohibited human use of wild plumage in the United States (Gray, 1993). In 1910, however, a schism occurred within the conservation movement. The separation between conservation espoused by Roosevelt, and preservation, as defined by Muir, resulted from differing views on what activities constituted “wise use”. Conservationists wanted to maintain the integrity of the environment for future generations, whereas preservationists wanted to prohibit any use on large tracts of land (Gray, 1993).

Aldo Leopold was a remarkable individual whose philosophies encompassed both views. His philosophical essays, especially *A Sand County Almanac*, contain preservationist overtones, but his theories on land management are consistent with conservation (Meine, 1988). Leopold's "land ethic", now a classic idea, may be treated as a paradigm for environmental ethics with a novel feature – the extension of ethical standing to include all nonhuman natural entities (Leopold, 1966). Loftin summarizes Leopold's position that "there is nothing intrinsically wrong with hunting, so long as it does not endanger species or degrade biotic communities; the moral value or disvalue of hunting depends on how one goes about it" (1984, p. 243). Leopold's thoughts manifested themselves in the popular axiom "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise (Meine, 1988, p. 503). Hunting, then, according to Leopold, can occur in a paradigm which extends ethical standing to the entire Earth.

Albert Schweitzer, an African doctor, is guided by a similarly expansive ethical principle – *Ehrfurcht for dem Leben* (Clarke, 1958). Literally untranslatable, the meaning of the principle is both honor and awe for life – sentiments stronger than simple reverence. Advocates of this concept accept that all destruction and injury to life, by whatever means, are evil, and that the individual is constantly confronted with the conflict between remaining ethical and submitting to necessity, thus becoming guilty (Clarke, 1984). Clarke proposes that there are related elements between this guiding principle, Leopold's "ecological consciousness", and other advanced conceptions of conservation. It is possible to accept *Ehrfurcht for dem Leben* in this sense "... only when 'life' is interpreted as being the whole interwoven and interdependent association

of plants, animals and soil, and the death that I inflict is right if harmony is maintained” (Clarke, 1984, p. 423).

The intricate role that killing plays in hunting is definitively expressed by the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset. Killing, he argues, gives the hunt authenticity; both the animal’s behaviour and the hunter’s response must be based on the conviction that the animal’s life is at stake (Grey, 1993). Furthermore, “it is the possibility of a kill that infuses all other parts of the hunt with meaning; the communion with death connects a hunter to life (Gray, 1993, p. 72). Gasset ably addresses the private turmoil a hunter experiences over the moral dilemma of hunting in the following:

Every good hunter is uneasy in the depths of his conscious when faced with the death he is about to inflict on the enchanting animal. He does not have a final and firm conviction that his conduct is correct. But neither ...is her certain of the opposite (as cited in Gray, 1993, p. 72).

Hunters, even when aware of their place in the larger ecological structure, experience a moral dilemma over inflicting death.

Cartmill, in his book entitled *A View to Death in The Morning*, explores the connection between hunting and being human. Many articulate hunters write that they hunt in order to feel a part of Nature. Craig Holt, a sports columnist, writes that hunting prevents him from becoming “isolated from the natural world” (Cartmill, 1993, p. 235). Geist, who defines hunting as “intercourse” with Nature, finds that hunting brings a heightened sense of the animal-human boundary. The opposite view, that hunting dissolves the human-animal boundary, is taken by individuals such as Dickey and Simpson (Cartmill, 1993). Coincidentally, those against hunting also wish to break

through this human-animal boundary and “both tend to see wilderness as a realm of order and harmony from which the human species is alienated” (Cartmill, 1993, p. 235).

Hunting to some represents the cause of human alienation, while to others, it represents the cure.

The holistic connection between the hunter and Nature is essential to Gasset’s philosophical orientation, and is supported by others. Clarke presents the argument that “... in many areas of our own culture and in most primitive cultures, the chase is an integral part of a life where true harmony between man and nature exists” (Clarke, 1984, p. 423). Loftin writes that a similar perspective is taken in the book *Turtle Island*, by poet and deep ecologist Gary Snyder. From Snyder’s perspective, “... hunting is an essentially atavistic activity which links man to the natural world and teaches him that food does not come from the supermarket shelf, wrapped in cellophane” (Loftin, 1972, p. 240). Clarke contends that “... man has lived, and in some places still lives, in harmony with nature, and the hunter and angler still cling to strong lines that connect us with the harmonious past” (Clarke, 1972, p. 423).

Support for hunting as a vehicle to bridge the gap between modern man and Nature may be eloquently stated. Erich Fromm (Swan, 1995, p. 49) writes that:

In the act of hunting, a man becomes, however briefly, part of nature again. He returns to the natural state, becomes one with the animal, and is freed of the existential split: to be part of nature and to transcend it by virtue of his consciousness.

Hunting, as an outdoor recreation activity, is one way to reconnect modern humans to Nature, and in so doing, potentially raises awareness of the perils of continuing to delay the environmental repercussions of our actions as population.

This essay has critically questioned the intent of outdoor recreation university curricula and identified the potential for it to perpetuate a fictitious balance of Nature. Educational systems are reflective of the more fundamental disconnection between general society and Nature. Outdoor recreation education and activities also offer hope to close this schism as they may positively contribute to understanding a holistic balance of Nature. While consumptive recreation activities (e.g., hunting, fishing, foraging) have been almost exclusively struck from university curricula, such activities present ideal opportunities open dialogue with students around the concept of holism. Educators have the opportunity to introduce a holistic approach towards Nature into the curriculum. Thinking about the need to close this disconnect towards Nature may also assist educators in being prepared to take advantage of “teachable moments” with students.

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