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Chris Loynes

Oceanic Learning

We have 10 years to save the planet. That is the view of an overwhelming consensus of scientists. Climate change has finally caught the attention of politicians, business people and the general public. However, less well-heard scientists are saying that the loss of biodiversity (WWF 2008) and the acidification of the oceans (ROYAL SOCIETY 2005) will challenge not only our current way of life but also our very survival as a species long before the temperature gets uncomfortable – at least for western Europeans. These problems are all interlinked and they are all symptoms of the central problems that are our lifestyles and our numbers. What can Outdoor Adventure Education contribute to tackling these problems?

Ocean acidification is caused by the release of carbon dioxide from solution in seawater where it is dissolved. As seawater warms it can hold less gas in solution. The result is like shaking a bottle of beer, carbon dioxide fizzes out causing the water to become more acidic. This has serious consequences for the survival of many marine plants and animals, by far the larger proportion of the Earth's biomass and biodiversity. As one example, coccoliths, one of the most numerous of planktonic plants, have a microscopic calcareous shell. When the plant dies the shell sinks to the seabed and the carbon it contains is locked up on a long-term basis. This may be the single biggest carbon sink in operation on the planet. As the ocean acidifies coccoliths are unable to secrete their shells. No one knows the exact consequences of this. Ecosystems are complex and full of unexpected positive and negative feedbacks. We know little about these and even less about them in the marine environment (MITCHELL 2009). We do know that, in the Irish Sea a few minutes walk from my home, the numbers of coccoliths are down 80%. Already.

On top of the ethical concern for our impact on the lives of other organisms and on top of the concern for the loss of yet another carbon sink and the impact of this on climate change there is another problem. In terms of ecosystem services coccoliths produce single-handedly by far the largest quantity of oxygen on the planet, several times more than all the rain forests put together.

These thoughts provoked me to think about what role the sea might play in any contribution that Outdoor Adventure Education might make to education that seeks to deal with the ‘triple crunch’ (the combined ‘crunches’ of economic, social and environmental collapse) or, as some are calling it, ‘planet crunch’ (JACKSON 2009; PORRITT 2009). In these circumstances, if there is a contribution to be made, I felt that it must be a priority to respond. In the light of such a threat to our very survival my previous interests in personal development through the outdoors seem like a secondary goal.

Surfing

I found a way in to thinking about the potential contribution of the sea through a conversation with an outdoor educator who was passionate about surfing. He claimed that, of all the adventure activities, surfing has developed amongst some of the participants the strongest environmental ethic. This ethic took on a political dimension in the surfing capital of the UK – Cornwall, where ‘Surfers Against Sewage’ campaign began and rapidly became world wide in scope. This has led to campaigns on wider issues such as clean beaches, habitat destruction and protection for rare marine animals. We discussed why this might be so. In his view surfers are as close to the environment as you can get as they read the wind, tides and sea state to predict waves and as they ride these waves in beautiful and exhilarating curves and swoops before crashing into the water to be tumbled and rolled over finally bobbing up ready for the next wave. This reminded me of a book by Alan WATTS (1977), ‘Tao, the Watercourse Way’, in which he compares the act of surfing with the philosophies of Taoism, a world view that understands humans in a two way relationship with nature and which has no sense of human dominion over it. In the view of my colleague being so close and intimately involved in waves in such a dynamic way inevitably leads to many surfers caring about the quality of the environment they are in, not just for their own interests but for the interests of other species and even in the interests of a healthy set of physical and chemical processes, if such an attitude is possible.

This conversation led me to consider a dichotomy long held in the field of outdoor learning between adventure and environmental approaches. Adventure has typically been constructed as essentially egocentric and, often, without much regard for the environment. Perhaps this view of adventure is guilty of thinking

of the environment as ‘biology’ that is living things. The physics and chemistry of nature are not included in this perspective. However, when they are then the elemental nature of most, if not all, outdoor adventures immediately has the potential to shift them into deeply environmental activities as the description of surfing above suggests. By making this change in perspective air, earth, water, temperature, salinity, gravity, friction and many other physical and chemical processes are highlighted. Rachel CARSON (1950) wrote eloquently about these physics and chemistry of the sea half a century ago. It is just these processes that are now essential in the understanding of climate change and other current concerns that it would be useful to have experiential ways of approaching.

The surfing outdoor educator was way ahead of me. He pointed out that, not only does surfing engage the surfer with the physics and chemistry of the ocean where he or she is surfing, it also connects the surfer far beyond the horizon to a global awareness. This he saw as being on two fronts. First the waves in the UK are generated by weather systems from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean which in turn are fuelled by heat from the tropics. This is then linked to the Atlantic conveyor that travels along a salinity gradient from the Antarctic Ocean. The path taken by these weather systems, as I know to my regret this wet British summer, is governed by a jet stream that encircles the northern hemisphere and oscillates in response to ocean currents and air masses in the southern hemisphere over the Pacific Ocean. A surfer will monitor all these events in the hope of predicting where and when to find the best surf.

It is a short step, my colleague suggested, from this knowledge of systems on a global perspective to understanding the changes occurring in these systems and the human impact that is causing them. Surfers, he argued, are much more inclined to grasp these global issues and think of them as important. Moreover, they are likely to think of them as something about which something should be done. This seemed to me to be quite distinctive from the potential of the elemental aspects of a land based activity. There is the weather, though land based adventurers seem much less engaged with the range of distant processes that influence it. Otherwise the elements concerned, rock faces, caves, rivers and so on, lead to a more local and placed based awareness. Useful as this is, it does not help in the task of finding experiential ways in to global concepts let alone motivating action.

A universal world view inspired by the oceans may also be encouraged by

what those who study perception call the ‘oceanic view’. The notion is that, faced with a far and wide horizon, people shift their mental states into one that readily embraces an awareness of the other, a feeling that is described by many as a sense of a loss of self. It is often referred to as a spiritual experience, fostering a sense of being part of something bigger and of being small in a vast universe. Kurt DIEMBURGER (1971) describes such a moment in his book *Summits and Secrets*. His view was also an elevated one looking out to sea from a cliff top. He describes how the rhythm of the waves was hypnotic. Others have commented on the setting of the sun in similar ways.

The second front, according to the outdoor educator, is that surfing is a universal activity. Whilst the interactions of ocean, land and sea are different in each place and at any time, the concept and the experience is universal and has led to a universal surfing culture with, my friend argued, a global awareness not just of surf and the factors that influence it, but of other environmental and social dimensions including, so ‘Surfers Against Sewage’ would suggest, some that are problematic. For example, my colleague pointed out that surfers have long been aware of sea level rises as favourite breaks around the world have already changed and even disappeared. Awareness of this is widespread and losses are mourned.

We explored a further possibility. The sea, especially at its margins where it meets the land, has many liminal aspects, that are places of possibility where the dynamics of everyday life, night and day, tides, currents, storms and so on, create spaces of constant change. The liminal properties of the outdoors have long been exploited by outdoor educators. The literal dynamics of outdoor settings coincide with a space that is understood as free, away from social norms and constraints. This combination creates crises, choices, experiences and narratives that encourage psychological changes or fractional sublimation (TANIGUCHI et al 2005) as it has been called. This space for potential change at a personal level is at the heart of outdoor adventure education, an approach that some call peradventure (LOYNES 2003). I would suggest that the extra degrees of liminality to be found on or by the sea could, with the right facilitation, enhance the mood for change, make change feel normal and provide rich metaphors for discourses of change. Change, we agreed, is a central need of our society if we are to limit the damage of our current way of life.

An additional factor that may be of interest is that most people understand

the sea to be part of ‘the commons’ that is a space that belongs to no one. This may lead to some people feeling that they can exploit the sea, over-fishing for example, and it has made it difficult to regulate it for such behaviours, the so called ‘tragedy of the commons’ at sea. Maybe it also has the potential for people, surfers for example, to feel more engaged with it perhaps in the same way that walkers have felt more engaged with the open spaces of mountains and moorlands and have protested when access has been restricted. Further, walkers have famously campaigned for a right of access, a right recently won in the UK. I have no evidence but I suspect this sense of a ‘commons’ to which all should have access extends to a feeling that environmental issues should also be higher up the political agenda for such spaces. If civil society is to place pressure on the causes of harm to these places, mountains or seas, then this sense of involvement in and responsibility for places is to be encouraged and ideally extended beyond those spaces readily understood as held in common to everywhere. Oceans could provide another space where these attitudes can be fostered.

Combing the beach for flotsam in order to check how far away the rubbish had come from before it was thrown over the side of a passing ship had, until quite recently, been my one and only tool for engaging with the global in a marine setting. I found these speculations with the surfing enthusiast inspiring. They gave me a lot more ways in to thinking about how I might link the experience of the sea with wider social and environmental concepts and issues in ways that required little or no artifice. The following inset describes some of the elements a colleague, Dr Kate Rawles, and I have been developing for one programme working with adult environmental activists through sea kayaking experiences.

Coda

My apologies for the deliberate but often clumsy use of nautical and atmospheric metaphors throughout this paper.

Outdoor Philosophy Sea kayaking Case Study

Some experiments have already begun. I have been working with Dr Kate Rawles for four years on her Outdoor Philosophy Sea Kayak courses. Our work could be summed up as 'empowering immersion'.

Empowering immersion.

Having direct experience. Feeling it. Imparting knowledge. Creating a language. Having a discourse. Creating and recreating meaning. Building new narratives. Valuing and acting on the discourse.

Elements of the programme we have found helpful include (not all at once!):

- Physical and emotional engagement
- Power of the sea: repositioning humans in relation to a dynamic and big environment.
- Perception and noticing: extending the awareness of the senses and of scale and time.
- Connection – valuing other species.
- The others – valuing the differences of other species.
- Oceanic feeling – moving awareness beyond the self.
- Mindfulness – relaxation and meditation to build on mindfulness beyond the self – an ecotrip not an egotrip!

Knowledge development

- Marine natural history
- Triple crunch updates
- Campaigning strategies
- Educational strategies

Concept building

- Gaian perspectives and ecosystem processes
- Carbon cycle
- World views of western society and ourselves.

Critical thinking

- Values clarification
- Action reviews
- Narrative development
 - of the meaning of experiences
 - of personal identity and possible life stories

To try:

- Conceptualising the physics of waves
- Seas in common – the concept of the commons and civil/third sector society.

More information: <http://www.outdoorphilosophy.co.uk>

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Useful Web sites

Magic Seaweed <http://magicseaweed.com/>

Outdoor Philosophy Sea Kayak <http://www.outdoorphilosophy.co.uk/>

Seamster at Sea <http://www.semesteratsea.org/>

Sea Shepherd <http://www.seashepherd.org/>

Surfers Against Sewage <http://www.sas.org.uk/>

