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EDUCATION FOR ENVIRONMENT

Because We're Worth It! An Exploration of Some Issues Around a Family Canoe Trip

By Richard Ensoll

In their concluding chapter, Pike and Beames (2013) acknowledge the “messy” complexity of outdoor adventure and its role in society where many aspects once widely accepted are being called into question and critically examined. While accepting that there remains much to be said for outdoor adventures, the authors articulate a growing acknowledgement that outdoor adventures can also contribute to a range of problems. In this article, I seek to ground some of these concepts in the context of my own practice: a family holiday.

My Family Wanted to Go on a Holiday

The idea started as a gap-year plan: my wife and I would leave our jobs and home, take our three children from school and travel. Over time this aspiration was scaled back to a five-week holiday visiting relations in Los Angeles, California and Vancouver Island, British Columbia while also including a canoe trip to the Bowron Lakes. The Bowron Lakes circuit involves 116 km of wilderness canoeing including lakes, a river and portages in a remote area of northern British Columbia, in western Canada (BC Parks, no date). It sounded great, so we thought “why not?”

Horace, writing early in the first century, is credited with the well-used phrase *Carpe diem*, commonly translated as “seize the day.” According to this dictum we should make the most of opportunities; we can afford the time and expense and so we should go for it. If we are seeking a justification, L’Oreal offers one ready-made: “Because you’re worth it!” There is much in favour of this message: I am worth it. I am unique and have hopes and aspirations that are worthy. I should pursue my goals and maintain relationships. Were I to live in a world where my actions did not impact on anyone else this might be enough but I do not. My hopes merit alongside yours and those of all other non-humans as they are also “worth it.” Eveleth (2010), points to John Muir’s articulation of this interrelatedness in his “Muir Web”: “When we try to pick out anything by itself we find that it is bound fast by a thousand invisible cords that cannot be broken, to everything in the universe.”

So, on one level everything is complex and we cannot act without some inevitable impact upon everyone and everything else while on another we are worth it and have but one life to lead. In the hope that we might make them more tangible, this article will explore some of the “invisible cords” that existed around our family holiday.

Perhaps you, like me, are part of the wealthy, privileged minority with the resources needed to consider this question. Perhaps, also like me, you are Caucasian and therefore able to dip into Peggy McIntosh’s (1990) “Invisible Knapsack” packed with unseen but nonetheless tangible privileges such as, “I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do” (p. 2). I have access to a British passport,

am literate, speak a major international language and so on. I therefore have a duty to be mindful of this privilege. In addition there are the non-human impacts of our holiday. We are warned that the negative impact of Homo sapiens on biodiversity is such that we may be in what has been described by Ceballos et al. (2015) as the “Sixth Mass Extinction,” mirroring dramatic events such as the extinction of the dinosaurs and calling into question our survival as a species. The factors involved are manifold, however one aspect of humankind’s impact has taken the form of climate change induced by an uncontrolled increase in atmospheric carbon. This is another complex issue, but long distance plane flights are seen as contributing significantly to climate change.

Our return flights from Heathrow to Vancouver alone (Carbon Footprint, n.d.) will account for the release of 4.5 tonnes of carbon per person. Monbiot (as cited in Rawles, 2013) has stated that to live responsibly within the limits of the planet’s resources we can afford no more than two tonnes per year for all our activities combined! With such a high price to pay, Rawles questions if there can possibly be any justification for pursuing our dreams in this way.

What about those without power and privilege, who may struggle for survival? Are they also worth it? Former Australian politician, Moss Cass (Australian Government Digest, 1975, p.1145), offered the following in a 1974 speech:

“We rich nations, for that is what we are, have an obligation not only to the poor nations, but to all the grandchildren of the world, rich and poor. We have not inherited this earth from our parents to do with it what we will. We have borrowed it from our children and we must be careful to use it in their interests as well as our own.”

Recent environmental events such as human-induced climate change suggest modern culture has not been successful in living out Cass’ stewardship principle. Efforts, however, have been made (Higgins, 2015; Wood, 2016) to protect the non-human planet through a legal route. Wood (2016) argues that the principle of holding our environment in trust for future generations is inherent to democracy and enshrined in the public rights doctrine that underlies most democratic legal systems. It is being argued that this doctrine supersedes any other rights including those of ownership. This means that, though I may own a piece of land, legally I am not entitled to destroy it. Nussbaum (2004) extends this concept further by arguing that non-humans have an inherent right to continue to exist, indeed to flourish, making this an issue of justice.

It seems that though we are worth it, so too are both our grandchildren and the non-human world.

My Hopes for Our Trip

My plan is to spend time with my own family, visit extended family members and see something of the places I was visiting. While planning the canoe expedition I went further by expressing a somewhat romantic aspiration that my children might be

allowed to hear what canoeist, photographer and writer Bill Mason (1988) described as the “song.” Mason’s song is that of the Sirens in Homer’s tale of Odysseus where these beautiful deities lured unwary sailors onto the rocks. Interestingly, apart from the gendered nature of the narrative, the Sirens’ song is characterised by a bittersweet combination of irresistible beauty and death. It has been suggested (Harrison, 1908) that this death may occur through starvation caused by an unwillingness to leave the land of the Sirens, despite the absence of any food. Here we find an example of the conflict that may exist between the desire to experience beauty and the elemental need to survive. A call to wild and beautiful places is counterpoised against a call to the towns and cities to earn money. Mason (1988) describes this Siren call as recurring each spring along with his response to quit work and go canoeing, writing thus:

Some people hear the song in the quiet mist of a cold morning; others hear it in the middle of a roaring rapids. Sometimes the excitement drowns out the song. The thrills become all that matter as we seek one rapid after another. . . . But for other people the song is loudest in the evening when they are sitting in front of the tent, basking in the camp fire’s warmth. This is when I hear it loudest, after I have paddled and portaged for many miles to some distant, hidden place (p. 1).

For Mason, key elements in hearing the song might include comfort after rigour and the physical distance associated with extended journeying. The longest canoe trip we had done as a family was three nights/four days and many have been much shorter. Although these had their rewards, I wanted my children to experience what might happen over a longer period. I hoped they might become attuned to the various rhythms of an extended journey and perhaps gain a deeper appreciation of its power and potential in their lives; that is, I hoped they might hear the song.

What I Hoped Hearing the Song Might Do

Outdoor education literature (Gilberston, 2006; Priest & Gass, 2005) suggests that on our journey my family and I might develop a range of skills, such as improving our canoe control and developing our intra- and inter-personal awareness. Henderson (2012) adds that we might also hope to develop “green skills”—learning to meet and interpret place—and “warm skills”—improving our ability to dwell in nature.

What application might these skills have? Modern Western society does not particularly value the ability to fashion a neat tarp, but perhaps the other skills can claim greater transferability. This is seen when considering mental health. Since we are part of post-modern Western culture we cannot expect to be immune to the associated pressures. These pressures have led to conditions such as “nature deficit disorder” (Louv, 2006) linked with a lack of unstructured time in green spaces and the spread of depression attributed to fast living, and loss of connectivity captured by the term “influenza” (James, 2007). Might we expect to enjoy some health-related benefits from hearing the song?

Henderson (2007 p.6) explains that there is no discrete word for health in the language of the Cree. He suggests that their word, Miyupimaatisiium, is best understood in terms of “connections between land, health and identity”. Healing and health are therefore intrinsically linked to the strength of connectivity and perhaps our understanding and appreciation of the invisible cords and the connections they provide. The Maori of New Zealand express a similar idea in “Mihi,” where an individual locates their identity through their mode of travel, their links to a significant body of water or river, significant land form or mountain and finally their family lineage. The Mihi can then be seen to root identity firmly in their connections to place. Could my family and I find improved health alongside a deeper awareness of our connectivity? Perhaps we might use the time and our experiences to develop our own Mihi?

Greenaway (1998 in Stott, Allison, Felter, & Beames, 2014 p. 197) suggests that young people can learn through expeditions by forming new connections in one or more of four dimensions.

- “1. To raise awareness of their own potential often through various kinds of challenge.
2. To learn about others in terms of relationship maintenance and community building.
3. To become more self-aware and emotionally stable.
4. An increased knowledge and understanding of the natural environment and other cultures.”

So we might forge new and tighter connections, with the potential to bolster physical and emotional health while also enhancing our skill sets. This may be worthwhile but might sound rather self-indulgent given the costs to human and non-human others.

Returning to the hard reality of the immediate costs Rawles (in Pike and Beames 2013) encourages us to focus on the ‘big stuff’ and in this regard we should place international flight at centre stage. As explained above our return flights from Heathrow to Vancouver alone (Carbon Footprint, no date) account for a release of 4.5 tonnes of carbon per person. The Eco systemic costs involved lead Rawles to question if there can be any justification for our holiday. In response to her question Rawles proposes a number of steps to minimise the impact and maximise the benefits of any such trip. These include questioning whether the trip needs to involve extensive travel, minimising consumption in terms of equipment and meat and maximising the benefits through contributing to the local environment, sharing your reflections and staying as long as you can. Some or all of these will be considered and clearly this article seeks to contribute in some way.

We are left then with a quasi economic balancing act between costs and benefits where immediate and relatively clear cut costs are vied against the hope of long term benefits.

How realistic is the hope that we might offset immediate costs against longer term benefits? Is this just 'pie in the sky' thinking and if not how can we maximise the chance of positive transfer. As a way in I will return to Mason's (1988) evocation of the 'song'. The call of the song was from the urban to the wilderness reflecting a popular urban-wilderness duality. Cronon (1995) describes the transition in meaning of the term wilderness in the nineteenth century from wastelands emoting feelings of "terror" to the wilderness as home of the "sublime". So the wilderness was transformed from a territory to be feared into a place of healing where God may be encountered, a kind of "new cathedral". Willis (2011) articulates the problem with this concept in terms of a binary between the wilderness as a place of high value, where God may be found and the God-forsaken urban. If one place is of high value then we can do what we like with what remains. If this thinking is allowed to colour my actions and those of my family the beauty of the 'song' may be appreciated and precious memories formed but the same dualistic thinking may allow us to segregate these experiences from our wider life. That is the care we take in the wilderness to, for example, 'leave no trace' will remain divorced from our behaviours in the degraded, urban world. Furthermore Loynes (2016) problematizes the tag line 'Leave no Trace' suggesting that it may, unwittingly have reinforced the dualistic thinking described above positing 'Leave more Trace' (or perhaps 'Consider your Trace') as a more inclusive option by encouraging us to consider our impact wherever we are. Similarly Henderson (2005 p.54) urges us to value all the otherwise generic 'spaces' we visit so that they begin to take the more specific and rich form of 'places' suggesting that stories can help this transformation. That is we should seek to understand and appreciate the stories behind the urban areas such as Los Angeles as well as the traditionally high value Canadian 'wilderness'. Put another way we should seek to listen with the same expectancy of hearing Mason's song while traversing downtown Los Angeles as we might appreciate the bright slice of a paddle through crystal lake water. Appreciating these special moments with the human and non-human world might be more likely to occur if we continue to ask what story lies beneath this 'trail' - wherever it is.

Willis (2011) explains that if we are to change our behaviours we first need to raise our awareness of the connections that exists between us and the rest of the "more-than-human-world". Drawing on narrative therapy techniques Willis urges us to pay more attention to our individual "life stories" and build new ones that allow us to explore new ways of being that are more mindful of connections and our impacts. If we can encourage each other to become aware of and explore new life stories we might be more likely to break down the divisions that can exist between the thoughts and behaviours of the 'wilderness' and the 'urban' me. The mindfulness I bring to considering my trace in the wilderness needs extending into the rest of my life whether it's dealing with waste or taking a moment to appreciate the air. Willis suggests we identify "sparkling moments" that hint of our own potential, perhaps in terms of relationships and caring for 'others', even uncharismatic non-humans such as

blackfly and mosquitoes. These moments may then be developed into stories that link to our wider lives building a new narrative.

Might we benefit from some healing in terms re-storying some of our internal narratives? Could we as a family begin a dialogue around urban beauty and nature in urban spaces? Could we create new personal narratives that break down the division we have internalised between urban and wild spaces. Look for the urban in the wilderness and vice versa and allow dappled shades of grey to break down stark boundaries? In doing so perhaps we may increase the chance that long term benefits associated with a few longer term (albeit minor) behavioural changes may offset the wider cost of our holiday.

Where Does This Leave Us?

Given the stark problems associated with climate change how can I justify travelling to the other side of the world to visit relations and seek out the ‘song’ in the hope that my romantic notion of ‘the song’ may be heard and appreciated by my children? Is there a potential for abuse of power here with minorities and the non-human planet picking up the tab? Yes. Does the concept of the ‘song’ and wilderness stand unquestioned? No. Are my family and their aspirations worth more than anyone or anything else’s? No. Yet the call remains. Referring to the reasons why environmentalists often continue to fly, Mombiot (2006) includes life changing experiences abroad and coins the term “love miles”, those miles accumulated while maintaining precious relationships. During our trip we plan to visit my sister and brother-in-law, we also hope to re-story our family’s quality of environmental relationship. If you’re reading this and rethinking your own family holidays perhaps it might turn out to be worth it after all.

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