Untrodden Paths: A Critical Conversation About Wilder Places In Outdoor Education

Jo Straker, Tom G. Potter, & David Irwin

Abstract

This paper asks, what is the outdoors, and challenges conceptions of the role the outdoors *play in education. It critically examines why a better understanding of the outdoors is important to outdoor education, how wilder places are essential to education, and how learning generated from these places can be translated into sustainable thinking and action. The enquiry is presented as a discussion between three experienced outdoor educators on international understandings of the outdoors and wilderness. In particular, they explore whether taking students to wilder places supports myth-making in uncritical ways, or whether experiencing these places reconnects them with nature, modifies their worldview, and in turn brings important aspects of the wild into their decision making about how they wish to live on the planet.*

Résumé

Qu'est-ce, au juste, que le plein air? Quel rôle joue-t-il réellement dans l'éducation? En quoi une meilleure compréhension de la nature profite-t-elle à l'enseignement en plein air? En quoi les espaces naturels et sauvages sont-ils essentiels à l'éducation? Et comment les apprentissages qui s'y effectuent se traduisent-ils en pensées et en actes? Cet article examine scrupuleusement ces questions. Il prend la forme d'un échange entre trois éducateurs chevronnés sur les différentes conceptions dans le monde des notions de plein air et de nature sauvage. En particulier, les trois intervenants se demandent si le fait d'emmener les élèves *dans de tels endroits encourage une forme de fabulation naïve, ou si cela leur fait tisser un lien avec la nature et changer leur perception du monde au point d'influencer leurs choix personnels et la façon dont ils entendent vivre sur cette planète.*

Keywords: education for sustainability, environmental education, outdoors, outdoor education, place-responsive, wilderness, wildness

Introduction

Among the many poetic statements Wendell Berry has been credited with can be found two pithy maxims: "If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are" (cited in Stegner, 1992, p. 199) and "If you don't know where you're from, you'll have a hard time saying where you're going" (in Goodreads, 2012, para. 35). The places where we live, recreate, and work are important; we

react to them in ways we are not always conscious of. They shape our identity and how we live our lives (Hiss, 1991).

Becoming more aware of the ways that places not only influence our learning but also inform who we become potentially changes the epistemological foundation of the outdoors. This increased cognizance modifies our surroundings, turning what was once a venue, or a backdrop against which we learn, into an integral part of who we are. As Rowles (2003) notes, "the self is in and of rather than separate from the individual's environment," adding "that lives are intimately and inextricably immersed in place" (p. 111). The importance of place is rising as more outdoor education scholars engage with the epistemological and ontological concepts of place and explore how different environments offer quite distinctive conceptions of outdoor education.

Dakin (2003) suggests that outdoor images of sunsets, forests, lakes, and mountains represent holistic ways of interacting with the world, as they can generate emotional responses that become significant events in our lives. In Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand, pristine, mountainous, and uninhabited areas have gained special status that resonate with aspects of national identity. Many Indigenous groups challenge this construct of uninhabited wilderness, but for marketing and building national identity attachment to wild lands remains a dominant theme. As outdoor educators, an important question to ask is, does taking students to wilder places support myth-making in uncritical ways, or does experiencing these places reconnect us to nature and in turn bring important aspects of the wild into our everyday lives?

While most outdoor education does not occur in remote or pristine areas, many outdoor educators seek locations that offer feelings of "being natural" because these areas are less dominated by human influences. Being in these settings creates a sense of distance from daily lives, which offers students opportunities to evaluate social values and their embedded habits. Looking beyond received wisdoms can help develop new understandings about "the way the world is." Place-based education is a distinct model of outdoor education that prioritizes local areas where students can engage with the cultural and ecological integrity of the places they inhabit. Often, placed-based knowing stresses the importance of ongoing and generational attachment between people and places, in such a way that each generation who enters that specific location is able to form an intimate relationship with it. While learning about the local area is valuable, engaging with the wider natural world is also important. Hence, another term that is gaining resonance for outdoor educators is *place-responsive* (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). A place-responsive approach is more about full-bodied pedagogical action and engagement and less about living in, and being established in, a certain place. Both place-based and place-responsive approaches are also key concepts in contemporary environmental education pedagogy.

The distinction between outdoor education and environmental education is contested by some educators (Irwin & Straker, 2014). At some times they have been perceived as being one and the same, while at other times there has

been a perceived tension between them. In these latter cases, outdoor educators have been critiqued for promoting competitive attitudes to the environment (Irwin & Straker, 2014). In Aotearoa New Zealand, there is currently no official requirement to teach environmental education and, as such, the discipline has struggled to become firmly established. Outdoor education, on the other hand, holds an official place in the national curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). Thus, outdoor education is a viable and valuable curriculum area through which critical environmental issues can be raised. However, this requires a considered approach not only to what kind of education takes place outdoors, but also to where it occurs.

This paper is based on a critical conversation via email between the authors about the importance of different environments for learning. We were particularly interested in how wilder places are used in outdoor education and whether learning generated from these places can be translated into sustainable thinking and action. Initially, we responded to a series of questions about international differences, which created opportunities for further discussion and debate. This paper begins with a brief grounding of our biographies and perspectives before presenting our dialogue and drawing some conclusions from it. It should be noted that while none of the authors identify as Indigenous, all claim a deep sense of belonging to their respective landscapes.

A Brief Introduction of the Authors

Jo– For the last 40 years I have worked as an outdoor educator in Britain, Canada, Australia, and Antarctica, and until recently I taught in a Bachelor of Sustainability and Outdoor Education program in Aotearoa New Zealand. Throughout my work I have listened to countless stories about how outdoor experiences have impacted individuals' life and learning opportunities. Though I have also noticed that many outdoor educators do not fully explore what they have in mind when talking about *the outdoors*, there nevertheless seems to be an assumption that it has a universal meaning. Understanding and appreciating the variety of nuanced meanings of *the outdoors* is significant, as our personal interpretations affect how we manage and educate through, about, and for the environment.

Tom– As a Canadian with about 35 years of experience teaching outdoor education, I've spent considerable time, in all seasons, in natural places—many quite remote. This has helped to shape and define who I am today. As my love for sharing time with people in natural areas has grown, so too have my experiences and my professional and academic credentials. These have increased alongside my frustration about the value of the outdoors being misunderstood—and thus undervalued and contested—by both academia and society at large. Since a casual observer can easily overlook the complexity of the outdoors, I have continually worked hard to educate and challenge these views; but as

Loughran (2009) notes, "Beliefs (especially when built up over a long period of time) are not easily changed" (p. 191). The impact, success, and future of outdoor education is deeply important to me, and I feel a responsibility not only to help it continue to progress, but also to influence it in a way that best serves society. I believe this can be achieved, at least in part, by creating authentic educational experiences that have deep relevance for students (Beames, 2016), and also by engaging students emotionally while fostering deep learning toward oneself, others, and the environment.

Dave– I originally trained as a primary school teacher, but for about 25 years I have been teaching primarily adults in the outdoors. How I position myself in relation to the discussions that follow reveals the complexity of the interaction between individuals, their communities, and the landscapes they occupy. As with Jo and Tom, remote landscapes have played a big part in my life. Although I have lived and worked in many parts of the world, I have a strong sense of belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand. With this sense of belonging comes an obligation and responsibility akin to the Māori concept of *turangawaewae* (Māori are the Indigenous Polynesian people of Aotearoa and turangawaewae is their expression of place). I have come to understand the ecological interconnectedness of all things, that humanity is part of very complex and dynamic ecosystems, and that anthropocentric thinking is the root cause of many problems that humanity currently faces. As an educator, I am particularly concerned with challenging learners to consider alternative ways of thinking and acting from those their social and cultural contexts have accustomed them to. How we perceive the outdoors is integral to this concern, for perceptions are not universal or constant, but rather manufactured through our interaction with the world around us.

In this paper we ask, what is *the outdoors*, and we challenge conceptions of the role *the outdoors* plays in education. We have endeavoured to elucidate why a better understanding of the outdoors is important to outdoor education, and in doing so, to strengthen the value of its foundations.

A Conversation

Please note that the following "conversation" has been edited for clarity and coherence.

Jo– Hi Tom, you've worked in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). Do you think there is a difference between what many Canadians call wilderness and what New Zealanders refer to as *the outdoors*?

Tom– Wilderness is certainly a contested term with its own cultural understandings and nuances. For example, while many Canadians use the term wilderness, this Eurocentric perspective overlooks the Indigenous cultures, many of whom do not identify with the term. For them what is often called "wilderness" is "home"; it is as much a state of mind as a physical entity (Potter &

Henderson, 2004). Bob Henderson (personal communication, 2004) unpacks the term "wilderness" by calling it "wild-ness." I think wild-ness speaks better to the Canadian understanding of more remote natural places in Canada. However, as wild and void of modern cultural objects as it may seem, most travellers will be challenged to find pristine places, let alone untravelled areas, within Canada's borders. First Nations peoples have travelled this land for countless generations, and the resource extraction industry in Canada is working hard to find "riches." So, while it's possible to get away from modern civilization and feel wild-ness, air traffic and insidious toxins are found in most places.

Jo– That's interesting. Do you think remoteness is an important part of wilderness?

Tom– It's tough to generalize what Canadians think about wilderness, or wild-ness, as our land spans six time zones; the area is so vast, and people's experiences and cultural backgrounds are so broad. I'm not so sure we have a Canadian understanding of what nature-based, or outdoor, experiences are. To some it would involve a bush plane flight north, while to others a trip to a national or provincial park would suffice. Then there are yet others who would be thrilled to be on the backside of a farm or in an inner-city park.

So, is there a different understanding of the outdoors between Kiwis and Canadians? Yes and no. I think our more front-country types of understandings would be quite similar. However, the nature of Canada's size does provide us with opportunities to participate in remote journeys where recreationists can travel for weeks and not see much evidence of modern life. In many ways people can still have the privilege of travelling the land and experiencing it in much the same way our predecessors did centuries ago (Potter & Henderson, 2004). As such, some experienced outdoor recreationists crave the opportunity to seek total solitude. So, their definition of the outdoors would include the more remote, which usually means north.

Jo– I agree that a diverse range of spaces and places constitute wilderness and the outdoors. The Canadian north is vast, so it's not surprising that it dominates in many Canadians' psyches as the nation's remotest area.

The term "wilderness" is not as significant for New Zealanders, although the legal definition focuses on the preservation of relatively unmodified landscapes; hence, tracks, huts, and bridges have been removed or no longer maintained (Wilderness Advisory Group, 1985). This means that while recreation is not banned in wilderness-designated areas, it is also not encouraged. The underpinning assumption is that humans spoil wilderness. Certainly some of the extractive industries are causing long-term issues that threaten the ongoing sustainability of the planet, but beliefs that humans always contaminate nature means our ability to establish stronger connections with nature is threatened. So, for me too, much attention on *remote and pristine* being the authentic state of the world can be a problem, as it is hard to be an intimate part of nature when you are positioned as an unwelcome alien.

Dave– You both bring up some interesting points. Tom reveals that although it is possible to distance oneself from the urban landscape, it is virtually impossible to distance oneself from the impacts of human endeavour. These impacts are far-reaching and more severe than most people realize. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (UNESCO, 2004) found that 60% of the planet had been degraded, and no part of the planet was free from human impact. In Canada, approximately 60% of old growth forests are now gone, along with the species that made their home there (e.g., see Klein, 2015). In Aotearoa NZ, this percentage is somewhat higher, with exotic ecosystems that are dominated by introduced species now being more significant than ecosystems featuring endemic and native species. According to Rockström et al. (2009), two planetary systems in crisis, and even possibly in a state of collapse, are biological diversity and habitat, both of which have suffered losses through land conversion for human use. From my perspective, most perceptions of wilderness, wild-ness, and remoteness overlook the reality that most of the planet has been tainted by human contact. I would argue that any pursuits of remote experiences that have the goal of regaining a nostalgic past need to be framed by this reality. If they aren't, the experiential learning is likely to be falsely valued.

I would also like to pick up on Jo's comment above about developing a sense of belonging. I agree that this is a very important aspect of taking students outdoors, and I admit that belonging is experienced on many different levels and can occur across many landscapes. But for Māori, *mihi* (a greeting including the expression of place) draws belonging down to the local, and many other Indigenous cultures (such as First Nations Peoples of Canada) do the same. Iwi (Māori tribes) generally remained in one place for extended periods of time, often for many generations, and they extensively modified their local landscapes through settlement and agriculture (Flannery, 1994). However, some Iwi were also very mobile, covering large distances to access seasonal food and other resources such as greenstone (jade). However, since Māori developed universally understood concepts of *pūihi* (wild forest) and *koraha* (wilderness) (Ryan, 1989), it is likely that these places held less familiarity than local landscapes, some uncertainty, and a sense of wildness (personal communication, Hemi Hoskins, 9th Feb 2017). Still, these terms do not indicate that these people were uncomfortable in these places, for both oral tradition and colonial records describe a deep knowledge of place that allowed for travel to occur over extended periods of time. Indigenous cultures evolved over millennia in response to the unique geographies and ecologies of place, and there is much variation in how different first peoples developed their cultures and perceived landscapes (Flannery, 1994). Such cultural frames are encapsulated in creation traditions, which order the universe and provide guidelines for interaction (Hoskins, 2012).

This Indigenous sense of "belonging to the local" is highly valued in environmental education discourse. And in Aotearoa NZ, belonging is often framed in indigenous terms by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. This is

because, as pedagogical theorists such as Jensen and Schnack (1997) argue, intimate knowledge of local places and their existing problems leads to ownership and action to initiate change.

Jo– I don't deny that local knowledge is important, but some local and national beliefs of ownership can exclude others. Building relationships with areas through journeys is also possible when the traveller is empathetic to the environment. Relph (1976) suggests that mobile lifestyles remove us from knowing our place in the world and set us adrift. His hierarchy promotes home—where one's roots are—as the most authentic and worthwhile form of connection. Cuthbertson, Heine, and Whitson (1997), along with Kaltenborn and Williams (2002), challenge Relph's hierarchy, instead offering a positive account of mobile lifestyles, which, they maintain, help develop a holistic and interconnected sense of place. Some place meanings, which emerged from studying nomadic life, revealed ways of inhabiting the earth that encapsulated a certain freedom and lightness. For example, nomads were intimately connected to a wide range of environments, despite not having a sense of ownership or control of any of them (Chatwin, 1988; Rao, 2002). Other research indicates that individuals form significant personal relationships with places through participating in a range of fun recreational activities and slow journeys. While these are different from living in a place, they nevertheless help to raise consciousness about, and build our connection to, the planet (Brymer, Downey, & Gray, 2009; Mullins, 2009; Wattchow, 2008).

The next question relates to whether it is important for education to go outdoors and, relatedly, how much wilder somewhere has to be to make it relevant (or not) for education.

Tom– So much of this depends on learning outcomes, values, and perspectives. For my students, the wilder location I can get them to, the better—but this often comes at a cost of time, money, and logistics. And, of course, we must consider our impact on the environment. That being said, I, along with the more place-responsive educators (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012; Wattchow & Brown, 2011), do believe that the schoolyard and park across the street can be extremely relevant and impactful; but this is dependent on our own values as teachers as well as on our teaching objectives. So yes, incredible learning can be accomplished "in town," but since wilder nature-based experiences are relatively accessible for many Canadians, "going out on the land" or "into the woods" is highly valued for many educators (Asfeldt, Potter & Henderson, 2013). Interestingly, it seems to be academics from Australia and Aotearoa NZ, and to an increasing degree the UK, that are challenging this dominant discourse about outdoor education requiring wilder places and are promoting a more sustainable place-based curriculum—a discourse that most Canadian provinces and territories have begun to participate in.

The growing body of literature re-envisioning outdoor education to more fully encompass educating for a sustainable future is perhaps somewhat

controversial (see Beames et al., 2012; Irwin, Straker & Hill, 2012; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). I praise these and other authors for questioning long-held assumptions and challenging conventional thinking; it is through controversy and debate that the field of outdoor education will continue to move forward and best serve society. This literature certainly challenges my views and expands my thinking, and for that I am extremely grateful. However, while I see socio-ecological perspectives as an integral and growing part of outdoor education and believe that it should be woven through virtually all of its aspects, I think this advocated focus by some should not come at the expense of personal development and outdoor skills. Therefore, I believe a delicate blend (personal development, outdoor skills, and socio-ecological aspects) is necessary and needs to be more strongly encouraged. Furthermore, incorporating "wild pedagogy" (Jickling, 2015) by encouraging students to "go wild" with intention can help students develop a deeper understanding of, relation to, and value for nature—a critical step in developing stewardship philosophies and activism toward environmental sustainability and protection. As such, Jickling (2015) speaks to this purposeful "wild" interval.

> The promise of wildness, it seems, is access to a sensuous world, and a way home. Outdoor life may provide a necessarily a part [sic] of this access, but it may not be sufficient. What may be required is a more profound disruption of one's ontological positioning. (Jickling, 2015, p. 160)

Building on thinking like Jickling's, many Canadian outdoor educators take students to more remote places, whether it be the outdoor residential camp, the overnight or extended canoe trip, or the snowshoe to a winter yurt. It is here that generations of Canadians have experienced the "wild-ness" of Canada and come to know and better understand, through their own toil and sweat, the people who came before them. As Potter and Henderson (2004) have observed, "There is also a strong sense of a real and mythical north that pervades a Canadian approach" (p. 69). Many Canadian outdoor educators seek a

> wilder nature for their students, and in so doing expose them to the ways of our North. They offer them the adventures of camping and travel skills, intra- and inter-personal skills, nature and heritage interpretation, survival/bush craft skills and knowledge of newer technologies (e.g., GPS). They hope to fill their hearts and imaginations with the pristine – the landscape from which Canadian exploration and settlement stories originated. Canadian outdoor educators hope to connect people to a well-storied landscape that gives Canadians so many of their icons: the beaver, the canoe, the loon, the snowshoe, the majestic white pine, the open sublime space, the winter stillness. And so, Canadian outdoor educators take people to find a personal and collective adventure of the spirit that they can find there. (Potter & Henderson, 2004, p. 85)

While heading north to explore the more pristine is revered by many Canadian outdoor educators, I don't think this wilder experience is any more

relevant than schoolyard learning. For example, while cross-country and alpine skiing share many characteristics, they are nevertheless distinct. In other words, they both offer similar and different learning outcomes. How much "wilder" does an outdoor education experience need to be to make it relevant? They are all relevant. Is a wilder outdoor education experience better than a less-wild one? No. Both can offer profound learning opportunities.

Jo– I agree exploring the wild is not *more* valuable, but wilder experiences do offer a distinct value, one not available in classrooms or city parks. One educator in my research (Straker, 2014) suggested that some space between school and outdoor education settings was required for students to change their mindset. He didn't know how far he had to travel, but his observations had led him to believe that it needed to feel different from a classroom. The idea of places changing one's way of thinking is significant for outdoor education. In my opinion this difference was diluted when the definition of Aotearoa NZ's Education Outside the Classroom (EOTC) changed from "learning that extends beyond the four walls of the classroom," to "learning and teaching that extends the four walls of the classroom" (Ministry of Education, 2009). EOTC in Aotearoa NZ is the Ministry of Education's term to encapsulate learning and teaching which occurs outside the classroom. And so the change, while subtle, is relevant, since the inclusion of walls indicates containment. This blurring of indoor and outdoor educational spaces means many of the norms of schooling are actually reiterated in the outdoors, which can limit what students experience and learn.

Experiencing a range of outdoor locations provides students with opportunities to learn in diverse ways. In moving away from the familiar, students become more cognizant of where they are from, seeing things afresh. By climbing up onto the ridge tops and looking down on the land, students observe the interconnectedness of farms, waterways, bush, and settlements. When Ingold (2010) states the ground becomes "level, homogenous, pre-existent and inert" (p. 120) when it is coated in asphalt or concrete, he highlights how what we can know is influenced by where we are. As such, we are inclined to think we live *on* the world rather than *in* the world. Evernden (1985) also notes that creating a people–environment dichotomy is problematic as humans are immersed in the world through bodily, cognitive, and emotional ties. Many outdoor environments teem with life; they activate the senses and allow moments where it is possible to realize that everything is connected. In moving through and physically engaging with the world, the body becomes an important way of knowing and learning about our connection with the environment (Atherton, 2007; Barbour, 2004). Classroom learning is still vital, but so too is being outdoors. It is important to offer different learning experiences to stimulate well-rounded understandings of the world.

Dave– So effective learning can take place inside the classroom just as it can outside the classroom, and of course the opposite can also occur. Learning is context specific; what is being learned should drive the educational context and

not the other way around. Experiential learning pedagogies can be effectively utilized across all curriculum areas and also across the continuum of urban and remote landscapes. Organizations such as Enviroschools are modelling experiential pedagogy very effectively in Aotearoa, NZ, and they now have over 30% of schools engaged (Enviroschools, 2015). I would argue that it is the careful alignment of context and content, which is at the heart of experiential learning, that is most likely to meet Jickling's (2015) challenge (cited above) relating to the profound disruption of learners' ontological positioning. This is because ontological positioning is related to identity, and identity formation processes are embedded, for the most part, in the communities and places we live.

Jo– The next question is, how does educating in wilder places enhance the overall purposes of education?

Tom– Maybe the first part of this question then is, "What is the overall purpose of education?" I think Foshay (1991) answers this well by stating, "The one continuing purpose of education, since ancient times, has been to bring people to as full a realization as possible of what it is to be a human being…. [Education] seeks to encompass all the dimensions of human experience" (p. 1). That being the case, every fibre of my body screams that a significant part of a meaningful education should then be found outside; and I do think that for education to touch people, for it to resonate within, it needs to be emotional and meaningful. In the outdoors, opportunities abound for problem solving, emotional connectedness, and creative thinking. A critical part of being human is to build relationships with other humans and with nature; the outdoors fosters this connection. And, through a deepening relationship with nature, anthropocentrism can be disrupted so that students realize that humans aren't the only players in this world. They will hopefully understand that nature has intrinsic value. All of the aforementioned benefits of outdoor education can support and enhance the overall purpose of education: to grasp what it is to be human and to embody all the dimensions of human experience.

Dave– Of course other definitions of education exist, and some of these are perhaps more critical of the purpose of education. Freire (1970) argues that education is about power, acting to maintain or to challenge dominant power structures. Brookfield (1987) suggests that true democracy cannot be achieved without critical thinkers who are prepared to consider alternative perspectives and challenge hegemony. To return to the question posed earlier in the paper about how outdoor education can best serve society, one needs to consider the key challenges facing society, our human landscapes, and the diverse ecosystems upon which all life is dependent. If it is accepted that planetary systems are in crisis, then this crisis should be the unequivocal focus for educators. All else pales in comparison. Put another way, is the outdoor education practice in question acting to maintain dominant power structures and perpetuate dominant ways of thinking, or is it challenging those power structures through the development of critical thinkers who are capable of taking action to improve the

world? There are times where remote settings will provide a suitable context for this sort of learning, but there are also times when they will not. I think outdoor educators need to be open to the challenge of this paradox.

Tom– You raise some critical points Dave, and in many respects outdoor education practice does often act to maintain dominant power structures and perpetuate dominant ways of thinking (e.g., the hyper-masculinity and male dominance that governs the field) (Oakley, Potter & Socha, 2017). So, while outdoor education is well positioned to challenge social power structures through the development of critical thinkers, education and change need to happen to ensure that outdoor educators understand the field's potential pitfalls and take advantage of their immense opportunities to challenge students to move toward more sustainable environmental practices and just societies.

Jo– Yes, there are some outdoor education programs that could do more to challenge societal norms, but I was heartened when interviewing outdoor educators (see Straker, 2014) because most wove social critique and deeper thinking into their programs. If we can help students learn to live with the rhythms of nature rather than fighting them, then it bodes well for more considered responses about how to live on the planet. Experiencing wilder places both recreationally and as part of education can help influence ways of thinking and being (Ingold, 2004).

So how can we enhance wilder outdoor education experiences to help students develop a stronger sustainability consciousness?

Dave– Several years ago a student gave me a book called *The Golden Spruce* (Vaillant, 2005). It was his favourite book, and it conveyed a true story about one person's struggle with deforestation. The author traces the awakening of Grant Hadwin, a timber scout working in the remote Canadian Pacific northwest, as he comes to terms with the wholesale destruction of the wilderness by the industry he works for. Eventually he discovers his local, much cherished old growth forests also coming under the saw and he is driven to take a stand. It is a very moving account of personal engagement and action. I recalled this book as I considered this final question, and did so because the power of this book for me is in the paradox between the wilderness and the barren, the wild and the vanquished, the ancient and the vanished. As the book indirectly suggests, enhancing wilder outdoor education experiences so that students develop a stronger sustainability consciousness requires embracing this dual reality that many of us now find everywhere we care to look; it necessitates critically thinking about how these landscapes came to be as they are, as well as discovering *our* responses to what *we* have uncovered (I have used the terms *our* and *we* for both educators and learners). I have come to realize there are four key components to this learning:

1. Understanding what we are encountering;
2. Realizing what solutions-focussed actions are available to us and engaging in them;

3. Being open to the need to adapt to new realities; and
4. Finding a sense of wonder and fun in a life well lived.

However, these components move beyond sustainability education, for they allude to changes not only in the way we think but also more importantly in the way we act and react to the world around us. Of key concern to outdoor educators is how to make learning relevant to the places in which we live—and to do so in a manner that celebrates action. For if we cannot do that, then we have failed our students.

Jo– I also read *The Golden Spruce* and took a very different message from it. I found the anguish and torment of Hadwin almost unbearable to read about. His actions and concerns took him away from society and positioned him as an outcast. He lost contact with, and support from, the communities he originally had an affinity with. This overpowering sense of despondency can frustrate and limit action, so I'm wary of focussing on the negative. Fredrickson (2006) suggests that positive emotions broaden perspectives whereas negative emotions narrow our focus as survival needs dominate our thinking. Hence, positive outdoor experiences, which encourage creativity and exploration, extend options for how we live, solve problems, and manage future threats. These occurrences are vital for a sustainable future. They are a common element in many outdoor education programs, and they can often help mobilize interest in the environment. The issue of changing behaviour to live more sustainably is, of course, much more complex than providing positive outdoor experiences but, as Harré (2011) notes, positive feelings can help people to start on a journey of social and environmental consciousness.

Dave– It is interesting how we all take different meanings from things, but I do appreciate (and at times even relate to) the anguish and torment experienced by Hadwin; I do not think any outdoor educator is entirely free of these feelings. However, I was not advocating that students adopt a similar response to the protagonist so much as I was promoting critical engagement with what we observe and experience in the world around us and also, consequently, action. This is where I interpret the work of Harré (2011), mentioned above, as being so valuable. Critical engagement with what we observe and experience, followed by taking positive and affirming actions, empowers students and encourages an understanding that they *can* make a difference. Such affirming empowerment was visible in Christchurch following the powerful 2011 earthquake that destroyed much of the city. Out of the ruins sprung the Student Volunteer Army, a group of several hundred university students that set out to help those communities hit hardest by the devastation. These young people were able to embrace the adversity imposed on them by the earthquake and then contribute to the city's recovery (for example, by assisting the elderly with obtaining food and clean water, and by clearing out silt that inundated houses in low-lying suburbs). Within an outdoor education context, I can encourage similar behaviour by, for

example, critically engaging students with the loss of biological diversity in a landscape and then undertaking habitat restoration activity to reintroduce it. The essence of the message Harré (2011) conveys is not about happiness in isolation from the context that we live in, but rather about taking positive actions to herald change in attitudes and behaviours that lead to what she considers living well on the planet.

Tom– You both unearth such thoughtful and important points. Certainly it appears crucial that students engage critically "in," "of," and "as" a part of nature (Dyment et al., 2002) through positive multi-dimensional outdoor experiences, whereby they will have the opportunity to engage with and reflect upon themselves and others as a part of the natural world. They will then be encouraged to develop a stronger sustainability consciousness and find meaningful ways to act. I have found that Lefebvre (2000) offers the following valuable set of criteria by which we can evaluate sustainability education efforts:

1. Including ecological, social (including political) and economic elements in support of sustainability;
2. Interacting with and learning in nature;
3. Using methodologies and teaching strategies to develop skills, values, and attitudes that allow for reflection, critical thinking, collaboration, and action for social change; and
4. Integrating materials and/or curriculum that supports community involvement and participation so that educational endeavours are contextually appropriate, relevant, culturally sensitive, and inclusive.

When considering the many components of Lefebvre's (2000) criteria, we can see how instructors' interests and skills are crucial. Regarding the second criterion, for example:

> maintaining ecological integrity is at the heart of sustainable living. Yet the necessary knowledge and skills required to assess ecological integrity—even at the rudimentary level of knowing what species are native to one's bioregion—is given little, if any, attention in most curricula. Outdoor leaders with natural history knowledge and interpretation skills have a tremendous potential to reverse our current state of alienation from the more-than-human world. (O'Connell, Potter, Curthoys, Dyment, & Cuthberston, 2005, p. 87)

And, through criterion number 3 we can see that,

> combined with creative forms of delivery, these [teaching] practices allow students to be exposed to views alternative to their own, to actively reflect on the viability and the consistency of their values, and to encourage social action based on open, critical assessment of issues confronting them. (O'Connell et al., 2005, p. 89)

Ultimately, I believe that in order to enhance wilder outdoor education experiences so that students develop a stronger sustainability consciousness, curricula planners and educators need to recognize and act on their responsibility to educate students to become sustainable leaders for tomorrow. And, as you previously mentioned Dave, since educators are currently "finding their way," authors such as Lefebvre (2000) and O'Connell et al. (2005), among others, can help us travel this important path. Making the journey through wilder places can be an effective way for developing a stronger sustainability consciousness among students.

Final Thoughts

From issues of sustainability to sensuous knowing, and action to contemplation, the diversity of experiences that wilder environments can generate is expansive. Positive, fun, active, and even nostalgic experiences can comprise students' journeys of awakening. This is especially possible when educators are cognizant of challenging constructed myths of identity and a romanticized past, both of which exclude and disenfranchise Indigenous and other non-dominant groups. Debate and acknowledging different perspectives is at the heart of teaching about sustainability. Such debate offers individuals opportunities to confront core values and seek out possibilities to change their current perspectives.

Another significant point is how the outdoors helps individuals break away from dichotomous thinking and recognize the complexity of the world. When the world is not divided into urban or non-urban, ecologically fertile or barren, valuable or wasteland, then students can gain valuable learning wherever they are. Embracing these dualities opens opportunities for students to discover how to respond to and connect with multiple places within the wider world. In addition, moving to places less familiar and less comfortable often helps students of any age to challenge the status quo and their preferred habits. These diverse sites can also help to disrupt our ontological position.

What the conversation above has also demonstrated is the potential of outdoor education to engage individuals, in a positive way, in an examination of socio-environmental issues. Rather than avoiding problems such as biodiversity loss, exploitation of resources, and social inequalities, alert outdoor educators can use synchronistic opportunities to raise these concerns whilst developing students' resolve and resilience. It is imperative to note that taking students into wild areas will not promote critical thinking unless outdoor educators address the paradoxes evident in both overly romanticized notions of our past and the beliefs that wilderness offers an authentic state of being whereby humans feel like aliens in the world. As Evernden (1985) discusses, personal encounters with the outdoors that are focussed on love and care can help many individuals overcome feelings of alienation. One way to help overcome this alienation is for education to focus on relationships with the wild, rather than on adventure

activities. If educators embrace the potential opportunities wilder areas offer, then indeed such experiences can positively inform our youth. Seizing such opportunities may help us all adopt a more sustainable approach to living within our planetary boundaries.

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Notes on Contributors

Jo Straker (PhD, MEd, BBs) has recently retired from her teaching post at the Ara Institute of Canterbury in Aotearoa New Zealand. She taught outdoor education for 40 years and still enjoys walking and cycling up and down hills. Her research interests focus on the potential of learning outdoors. **Contact:** jobrian@ihug.co.nz

Tom G. Potter is an Associate Professor in the School of Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. His teaching and research interests blend to include the pedagogy of outdoor education, outdoor leadership, risk management, transportation safety and nature-based therapy. **Contact:** tom.potter@lakeheadu.ca

David Irwin (PhD) is manager of the Sustainability and Outdoor Education Programmes at the Ara Institute of Canterbury in Aotearoa New Zealand. His teaching and research interests lie in the exploration of culture, identity and human-nature relationships, and educating for change to a more sustainable future. **Contact:** David.Irwin@ara.ac.nz

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