

Extreme sports as ecotourism

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Abstract

This paper discusses what can be learned from research on extreme sports that take place in the natural world. An hermeneutic phenomenological method was used where data were gathered from interviews with 15 extreme sports participants and other first hand accounts. The extreme sports included B.A.S.E. jumping, big wave surfing, extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, extreme mountaineering and solo rope-free climbing. In contrast to theorists who write about the natural world as a resource, battlefield or playground, extreme sports participants speak about developing a relationship with the natural world where humanity is considered to be part of the natural world.

Key words: Extreme sports, ecocentricity, self

Introduction

For the most part, discussion on the human relationship with the natural world is an anthropocentric proposition that views nature as merely a human ‘multi-faceted social-construction’ (Simmons cited in Shoham, Rose, & Kahle, 2000, p. 249). Dialogue is centred around the Cartesian notion that the natural world is simply a type of machine (Wilshire, 1997). Nature is considered as an inanimate *other* providing a resource, medium or place for conquering or communion, a play-ground or natural reserve (Birrell, 2001; Shoham et al., 2000; Slattery, 2001). This duality of thought is often reflected in theoretical perspectives on outdoor education (Nicol, 2003).

Extreme sports are defined as outdoor leisure activities where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death (Brymer, 2005). Typically, participation is considered to be about crazy people taking unnecessary risks, having ‘No Fear’ or holding on to a death-wish where theories such as sensation seeking (Rossi & Cereatti, 1993; Zuckerman, 2000) have been employed to provide explanations and often with a negative focus.

Extreme sports are often represented as the ultimate demonstration of humanities power and control where nature’s laws do not apply (Millman, 2001). Writers who have explicitly made reference to the affiliation between extreme sports and the natural world consider participation as part of an innate human drive to conquer or battle against nature as part of a need for identity formation (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Millman, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1999). A notion perhaps related to the perception that as humans we have become so insulated from the natural world that it has become something to fear and therefore control (Stilgoe, 2001).

Millman (2001) considered participation in extreme sports to be the epitome of naïveté and nihilism that stems from self-indulgence. The argument being that as society enforces a powerlessness and insignificance on people so people will search for a way to prove to themselves that they are powerful. Le Breton (2000) considered the extreme sport experience to be the ultimate hand-to-hand fight, where an individual's battle against nature somehow adds importance and value to their life.

The posited *essential* relationship between the natural world and the extreme sport experience is one where participation is about *battling against* or attempting to *conquer* or *vanquish* an aspect of the natural world. However, the relationship may not be as typically perceived, perhaps it is not about conquering but about the process or journey (Olsen, 2001). The notion of the natural world being a thing to conquer may be more a reflection of how a naïve non-participant of extreme sports understands the relationship as opposed to an element of the extreme sport experience. That is, it may not be that a person constructs an identity through mastering the environment. This view has certainly been explored by writers in other fields (Abram, 1996; Zimmerman, 1992).

This paper, part of a larger hermeneutic phenomenological study on the extreme sport experience, examines the implications of the findings for understanding the relationship between the natural world and extreme sport participation. A relationship revealed as an harmonious interaction between partners likened to a 'dance.' Where the metaphor of 'dance' is recognised by us as a partially inexpressible emotionally filled experience (Dienske, 2000) involving intended and creative movement (Lane, 2005). Through 'dancing' with the natural world an extreme sports participant accepts

a challenge to look within. The authors briefly outline some implications for outdoor education in general.

Methodology

Fifteen participants (10 male and 5 female athletes) from Europe, Australia and U.S.A., aged 30 to 70 years were the focus of the study. They were included for three reasons. Firstly, for being extreme sport participants, that is participants of leisure activities where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death. Secondly, for their ability and desire to unravel the extreme sport experience and thirdly, for being outside the age group typically discussed in the literature about alternative sports. Participants were chosen for the sake of the phenomenon (Van Kaam, 1966) and for their ability to explore the experience not for their knowledge of the phenomenological framework. Other data sources including first hand accounts in the form of autobiographies, biographies, academic papers and video were sourced from around the world including India, China, Taiwan and Nepal. The extreme sports included B.A.S.E. jumping, big wave surfing, extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, extreme mountaineering and solo rope-free climbing. Participants of alternative, lifestyle or sub-culture sports that did not fit the definition as outlined earlier, including surfing, skiing and so on at a level where death would be rare or non-existent or sports such as skateboarding and BMX were not included.

Focused conversations with extreme sport participants were conducted face-to-face or by phone. One question guided the interview and analysis process '*what is the extreme sport experience?*' Or to put it another way '*how is the extreme sport experience perceived by participants?*'

The first stage of the interview analysis involved listening to each tape immediately following the interview (Amlani, 1998; Ettlign, 1998). The second step involved repeatedly listening to and reading individual interviews and transcripts. Each individual tape/transcript was listened to, read and thematically analysed as a separate entity though all transcripts were revisited as themes became more explicit. Both formal and non-formal understandings of potential themes were continually questioned, challenged and assessed for relevancy. Questions such as; ‘what is beneath the text as presented?’, ‘am I interpreting this text from a position of interference from theory or personal bias?’, ‘what am I missing?’ guided the intuiting process.

Both verbal and non-verbal aspects of the interviews were considered. Interesting phrases were highlighted and any relevant non-verbal considerations were noted. Accepting Steinbock’s (1997) argument that phenomenological descriptions are not about reproducing ‘mere matters of fact or inner feelings’ (Steinbock, 1997, p.127), these notes were reconsidered in terms of potential underlying thematic phrases or meaning units (DeMares, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). A similar interpretation process was undertaken with video, biographies and autobiographies.

All such emerging themes were assessed to determine any potential connections. Certain initial thematic ideas were grouped and further defined. These second order themes were considered against the original transcripts to ensure the accuracy of interpretations. This whole process was repeated again and again, testing the assumptions, until interpretations seemed to gain some solidity and form. The reviews were then assessed against the words of those participating in an attempt to

expose what might be a more appropriate understanding of the extreme sport experience.

The following quotes illustrating the themes have been taken from a variety of sources. Where the source is a direct interview participant quote we have we have changed names in order to maintain confidentiality.

Results and Discussion

As noted in the introductory section, the common perception about extreme sports is that participants are either out to conquer or battle nature either a) in a desire to create an identity or b) in an attempt to somehow prove themselves. The aim of this paper is to question this view point and present another viewpoint that might offer something extra to the outdoor education field.

A. On conquering

So is it about the need to conquer the natural world? Houston (1968) was quite clear that the relationship could not be one of conqueror and conquered.

Mountaineering is more of a quest for self-fulfilment than a victory over others or over nature. The true mountaineer knows that he has not conquered a mountain by standing on its summit for a few fleeting moments. Only when the right men are in the right places at the right time are the big mountains climbed; never are they conquered (Houston, 1968, p. 57).

Compare those words with the following from a white-water kayaker recalling a trip in Russia:

You cannot conquer a river. How can you defeat something that is never the same twice, that is unaware of your presence? To the river, we are so much flotsam, and if we forget that the results can be decidedly final. It is often difficult to remember the force of the river in places like this; the water can smash a swimmer to pieces on the rocks and leave them broken like a doll or a piece of rubbish bobbing in the backwaters of an eddy.

There was enough force in ‘The thing you strain spaghetti through after you’ve cooked it’ [*the name of a particular rapid*] to rip us from our frail craft and pound us like so much drift wood. And the river wouldn’t even know we were dead. There can be no competition, no way we can fight against the huge forces we travel on (Guilar, 1999, chap 11 [brackets added]).

Page (2003) wrote that big waves pay no attention to the surfers riding them and by implication would not even know that a competition was in place.

B. The relationship

Some participants report that a more appropriate understanding of the relationship is an interaction *with* the environment as partner. Lynn Hill the extreme climber considered that climbing was about adapting to the rock and that:

It is not about going out there and conquering something-proving that you are somehow stronger than other people or the rock you’re about to climb. It is much more about interacting with your environment (Hill cited in Olsen, 2001, p. 59).

For Hill it is only by achieving ‘a harmonious relationship to the rock’ (Hill cited in Olsen, 2001, p. 60) that an extreme climber can progress at all. A point recognized by Midol and Broyer (1995) who observed a nature–human relationship that seemed to be more about interacting and blending with the environment.

Snow and mountains are perceived as living entities, at once dangerous and benevolent. In their return to an intimate dialogue with mythical characters, skiers experience a phantasmogorical relationship that is also real. One must blend with the environment, become one with it (Midol & Broyer, 1995, p. 207).

Olsen (2001) also found that the women she interviewed for her book spoke about a partnership with the natural environment or about being in harmony with self and the environment. Slanger and Rudestam made reference to a partnership and a state akin to a dance:

A solo climber stated that he did not use ropes because it interfered with the dance-like quality of climbing, while another said that he was motivated by the movement of climbing. A kayaker said, ‘what motivates me is the state I enter into. There is a real clarity and heightened senses-both physically and of mind. The risk is completely out of my mind. I am connected and in it. All my senses just feed in’ (Slanger & Rudestam, 1997, p. 366).

And later they observed:

Climbers spoke of the feeling of movement and rhythmical pleasure of the experience. Aerobatic pilots spoke of the pleasure and beauty of controlled

movement in space. Kayakers expressed their appreciation for the beauty of the natural environment in which their activity took place and the pleasure of intimacy with the rivers, getting to know their various characteristics and idiosyncrasies (Slanger & Rudestam, 1997, pp. 370-371).

Booth (2003) likens surfing big waves to a dance ‘to and with a natural energy form’ (Booth, 2003, p. 316). Guilar (1999) recognised the kayaking experience as one where the kayaker works with the river and should the relationship turn to competition or fight then the likely result would be death. A point echoed by Charles Houston (1968), an experienced Himalayan expedition climber and surgeon:

The aim is not to conquer, for mountain climbing is not a conflict between man and nature. The aim is to transcend a previous self by dancing a ‘ballet’ on the crags and precipices and eventually, at very long last, to emerge exhilarated and addicted (Houston, 1968, p. 49).

This relationship is often experienced as humanity being part of the the greater natural world

The place is still powerful, it has energy and it’s giving back to you. For me I get an insight into the fact that we’re interconnected and that while we can die, life and everything is connected. We’re all part of this cycle, this sounds very esoteric I know and its difficult to put into words, but with B.A.S.E. jumping you can go places that other people can’t go. You can stand on the edge of these huge cliffs and put your arms in the air where you’re totally vulnerable and totally part of the environment, at the same time. So it gives an opportunity to experience places and a way of looking at things that we can’t

normally do because we're too restricted by fences and rules and our own fear
(Vicky, B.A.S.E. jumper).

Those who participate in extreme sports consider the concept of fighting or conquering the environment, at best, an unfortunate misunderstanding. After all, how can a person conquer a mountain that does not even know that they, the small insignificant human, even exist or defeat a river that is never the same? One cannot compete with nature when nature does not even know that a competition is taking place. Rather participants speak about a partnership or relationship where the natural world has greater or equal status.

Implications

Beyond the egocentric and homocentric approach lies what Kleffel (1996) described as the ecocentric approach. Nature has intrinsic value for its own self (Oelschlaeger, 1992). Current theorizing in ecopsychology implies that the disconnection from nature, or the more-than-human world, adversely affects mental health (Frumkin, 2001; Scull, 1999; Wilson, 2001). For Glendinning (1994) human-beings are inseparable from the physical world with the implication that to be fully healthy beings such a connection must be re-established. That is, despite naïve perceptions that human beings are unique amongst animals our connection to nature is as so called 'lower-animals' (Williams & Parkman, 2003). This is not in the sense of nature as battleground, playing field or resource but in the sense of nature-as-family, nature-as-self or nature-as-unity (there is no relationship as there is no separation). To fight nature is to fight oneself, to understand nature is to understand oneself, to be in the natural world in all its glory is to be in oneself in all its glory (Watts, 1970).

The findings of this study indicate that by experientially accepting that we are part of nature as perhaps a leopard or bird is part of nature we open ourselves to different ways of thinking about the natural world. To be in nature in such a way that these life altering experiences are discovered also seems to rely on an acceptance that the natural world is more powerful than humanity. In this way we can let go of the need to control, conquer or battle against the natural world. In a similar way the natural world becomes more than playing field or resource. The natural world and humanity are experienced as one. To do so rather than cultivate an atmosphere of natural world as other and worthy only of risk management we should develop a relationship of natural world as intimate.

Institutions could nurture this relationship by reframing delivery so that the inclusiveness and intimacy of nature is enhanced, where nature becomes a partner. To do this we need to reconsider some of our current metaphors for the natural world.

This paper explores some preliminary findings of a hermeneutic phenomenological study into extreme sports. Findings indicate that the typical perceptions about selfish, risk-taking participants that are supported by theory driven methodologies have missed something. A phenomenological perspective finds that participants talk about a more positive relationship with the natural world. These findings point to a more inclusive management practice. Some of these implications are:

1. We should work with participants to determine the best way of providing facilities as opposed to banning the activities.
2. As management professionals we should move away from the current obsession with thrills and risk. For example marketing should focus more about truly connecting with the natural world.

3. Extreme sports are here to stay and are growing; they are not about instant thrills but long term commitment. Perhaps a better understanding of this aspect might help with the development of commitment in other areas of ecotourism.

Conclusion

Extreme sports have built up a reputation of being all about adrenalin and the battle to prove oneself against nature. However, this does not seem to match the experiences of those who participate. Extreme sports participants speak about the natural world as a partner and humanity being part of the natural world. Athletes talk about being in harmony with nature. These experiences are reflected in modern eco-centric research and writings.

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