

The Wilderness Effect

The psychology of being 'outside'

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Version 1, March 2009. Produced by the Free Range *Energy Beyond Oil* Project 'Great Outdoors' Initiative
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20p
(where sold)

The past nine units of this series have looked at the practical benefits of learning to live outdoors. Now we look at a wholly different issue – psychology. Recent evidence shows that living outdoors “in nature” makes you feel better, and has been shown to help those with mental health problems. More importantly, by coming into closer contact with the natural world we can find the space to slow down from the pace of technological society, and in these circumstances perhaps we can more easily visualise our slower, simpler, low-energy future lifestyle.

'Wilderness' – a problem of definition

The Free Range Network's 'Great Outdoors' initiative encourages people to camp outdoors because it is a means to learning both the skills to live with less material goods. However, it also creates in us, through practical experience, a sense that we are each capable of leading such a lifestyle. As William Cobbett stated¹ more than a hundred and eighty years ago, “*Health, peace and competence*’, one of the wisest of men regards as the only things needful to man; but the two former are scarcely to be had without the latter”. Our hope is that the ‘competence’ that we can develop through simple ‘rough’ or ‘wild’ camping can enable us all to find health and peace in the coming strife of the global energy crisis.



Although we might put emphasis on the practical, it is also true that we can find mental relief through experiencing closer contact with the natural world. When we take day trips outdoors, or when we rely on ordinary camp sites or on formal holiday accommodation, our interaction with “the outdoors” can only ever be limited; but if you can take all your needs easily on your back then you are able to venture deeper into the wild areas of the country, and take as much time as you wish about doing so, because you are not tied to being somewhere at a particular time.

In the USA, there is an increasing body of research on what is known as *The Wilderness Effect*. This has been the result of formal and informal studies of the effect long contact with the wilderness has upon people (both “ordinary” people and those with certain psychological conditions). What these studies show is that close interaction with nature allows people to unbundle their problems and experience their own feelings and capabilities in a new way. Provided that people are able to act upon experiences that their wilderness trips provide, they are then able to make positive changes to their lives.

The problem is, in the context of the UK, we don't have large areas of land available to disappear into – consequently it can be difficult to translate the weeks of trekking that are possible in the USA with the limited opportunities available in the UK. However, provided that you can competently camp and carry a few days of food, even in the UK it's still possible to

put yourself a day's walk away from civilisation in parts of the South-West, Mid- and North Wales, the Northern Pennines and much of North-West Scotland. We also have a good network of long distance foot-paths that allow you, whilst not in 'the back of beyond', to take a more leisurely pace of travel across the country for a week or more.

A new study – *Ecopsychology*

A large part of the body of research on The Wilderness Effect has come from the new research into *ecopsychology*². Traditional psychology, as with other 'Western' scientific disciplines, gives no weight to the value of the natural environment to human beings – *only the individual matters*. Ecopsychology attempts to rectify this deficit, which does not exist in many Eastern philosophies and traditional/aboriginal cultures, by studying how people interact with nature, and to what extent our evolution as nomadic peoples over a few million years, which ended only a few thousand years ago with the development of formal agriculture (and of course, large-scale urbanisation is a phenomena of just the last two centuries), still has an influence on us today through our deep desire for interaction with the natural world.

The factor that we see again and again in the study of ecopsychology is something often referred to as “the other”; in our daily lives we only get to measure our self image and our abilities against those of other humans, and of human creations. But



when we immerse ourselves in nature we lose these pressures because it represents something “other” than human. More importantly, the “wholeness” or “interconnected” form of the natural world stands in stark contrast to human society – *where in nature do we find traffic jams, waste dumps and a pressure to conform/consume?*

The “otherness” of nature allows us to unbundle our problems and focus more clearly on addressing them because the deep feelings that nature awakens puts our modern human problems into stark perspective – *we create the time and space to think.*

“Losing it”

Recent psychological research makes a clear case that the increasing pressures created by the faster

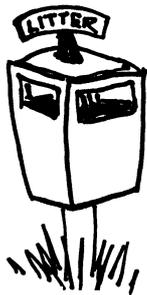
pace of modern society, from mass media-led consumption, to debt, to longer working hours, is causing increasing levels of psychological stress. This trend was even examined in a UK government study, eventually released as part of a sustainable Development Commission publication³, in which Cabinet Office researchers concluded that –

“Policy makers in the UK are, in effect, confronted with a double dilemma. Increased economic growth is generating more and more negative externalities that threaten to overwhelm the life-support systems on which we depend. Equally, increased economic growth isn’t necessarily making people any happier.”



The difficulty is that our modern, growth-led, consumer society is a *delusion*; it exists in ignorance of the clear physical, technological and environmental constraints on the human species – not least that the oil, gas and coal, which sustain economic growth, are all going to enter a decline in production between now and 2050. But if, tomorrow, most people were to perceive these problems as real there would be chaos because so many of us are inextricably bound-up within the current form of our society and can see no alternative option to these patterns of living. In fact, even those trying to leave “the system” are to some extent bound up within the ecological (and human) damage that underpins the operation of the global economy. This leaves everyone who may perceive the deeper truths in our society in what may seem an inescapable state of despair and hopelessness. Or, as Theodore Roszak says in his essay, *Where Psyche Meets Gaia*⁴ –

“We can read out transactions with the natural environment – the way we use or abuse the planet – as projections of unconscious needs and desires, in much the same way we can read dreams or hallucinations to learn much about our deep motivations, fears and hatreds. In fact, our wishful, wilful imprint upon the natural environment may reveal our collective state of soul more tellingly than the dreams we wake from and shake off, knowing them to be unreal. Far more consequential are the dreams that we take with us out into the world each day and maniacally set about making ‘real’ – in steel and concrete, in flesh and blood, out of the resources torn from the substance of the planet. Precisely because we have acquired the power to work our will upon the environment, the planet has become like that blank psychiatric screen on which the neurotic unconscious projects its fantasies.”



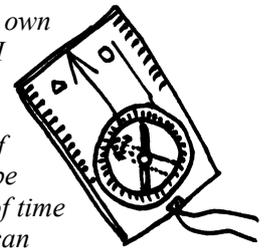
This is why reconnecting to natural systems, through activities like wild camping, can be such a valuable tutor. It’s not just that you become more self-reliant, and able to learn life-skills that require less resources to sustain. At the same time the “otherness” that nature provides allows us to look at our difficulties, individually and as a species, and find ways through what may seem from within mainstream society a wholly insolvable set of issues.

The Wilderness Experience

As noted above, we don’t have a lot of “wilderness” in Britain – certainly in terms of the scale of wilderness which ecopsychologists in the USA talk of. What areas there are, with perhaps the exception of the far north-west of Scotland, are already under tourist pressure, and much of the rest of the country has been re-modelled by modern agriculture since the 1950s. Even so, there are pockets that you can find where, if only fleetingly, you can experience a clear contrast to the patterns of modern life; watching the sunset or sunrise, listening to insects and birds, or, when camping over-night far away from the most urbanised areas, perhaps seeing the night sky in all its brilliant detail for the first time.

In the book *Radical Simplicity*⁵, in which Jim Merkel outlines his ideas on how we can all radically reduce our consumption, the process of encountering nature is summed up as follows –

“The more time you are in nature, the more it enters your being. I enjoy being in nature with others, but there is a special quality in being alone. Pets and friends draw me to their own sights and smells, some of which I would miss. But alone, a certain intensity magnifies the land’s voice. It is clearer. The subtlety of my own senses and instincts can be followed directly. A healthy diet of time alone and with friends in nature can ground the whole process of reducing your impact.”



In the context of the *Great Outdoors* initiative, it’s the activities that you carry out when outdoors that are also relevant, not just the experience of being “in nature”. Camping simply not only allows you to develop your skills of self-reliance, but once you’ve become proficient you’ll find, without distractions such as the TV, mobile phones and the Internet, that you’ll have more time to slow down. Then, with this slower pace, you will begin to attune your senses to your new surroundings.

In his essay, *The Way of the Wilderness*⁵, psychotherapist Steven Harper outlines his experiences of leading groups into the wilderness and the effect it has upon the senses –

“Upon entering wilderness, one of the first things almost everyone experiences is an enlivening of the senses. Suddenly, we are bathed in (and sometimes overloaded with) new sounds, awesome sights, interesting textures, different smells and tastes. The awakening of our senses, or perhaps better stated, ‘coming to our senses’, is a subtly powerful and underrated experience. People learn how greatly some of our basic modes of perception have been dulled in order to survive the urban world; many have been deadened unnecessarily. As long as we remain unaware of the richness of our senses, we have little choice about what we sense, and thus our perception is censored.”

This might make everything seem “fun”, and so it’s important to note that he goes on to talk about how the “problems” of being outdoors are helpful –

“Wilderness is not a carpet of flowers. Wilderness also includes grey rainy days, animal fouled water,

dark, perilous forests, and deathly dangers. For example, our culture consistently avoids mud and rain; vacation ads depict white clean beaches and sunny skies... Metaphorically, our willingness to be in the mud and rain can reflect our willingness to be in our internal mud and rain. To put oneself in mud and rain is more than a matter of tolerance; it is active participation in our own 'raininess' or 'muddiness'."

He finishes his essay by noting that some of the most significant effects that he has studied occur when the participants return from their trip –

"Yet no matter how fully we experience the primordial self while in the wild, the real work begins when we return. Even the most potent wilderness journey can be lost in a few moments or days, brushed off by saying, 'I've got back to the real world now!..."

How can we find this same sense of sacredness in everyday life? Like any powerful transformation, the awesome (and many times overwhelming) experience of wilderness can be difficult to incorporate into our everyday life... Upon emerging from wilderness we are confronted with our inconsistencies and notice more than ever before how drastically out of balance we live. Many return to a great sense of loss or pain, realising how cruelly we have divided our lives. This schism is felt deeply and can make living our 'regular' life very difficult."

The answer is of course that if you perceive a problem with your "ordinary" life then you should change it. There is one obvious truth that, on returning to our "modern society", we can all perceive clearly: **You cannot consume your way out of a crisis of consumption!** In the absence of any clear, non-consumption-based plan from politicians, and even many in the mainstream environment movement, we are on our own. We should take our new skills and our new inspiration, developed through the practical experience of camping, and seek to form a new lifestyle and social networks ourselves.

Slowing down and finding "mindfulness"

Speed requires energy, and in fact as society speeds up it must use more energy and resources; going faster doesn't just exponentially increase the energy required to move, but in order to maintain safety the vehicles we travel in must be built more strongly (which adds weight and increases the energy and resources consumed further). Learning to slow, to relax, to let go, and find your own pace can allow you to find new opportunities for change in the space created by living life at a slower speed. In his book, *In Praise of Slow*⁶, Carl Honoré states the benefits of walking over other modes of transport –

"There are many good reasons to walk. One is that it is free: you don't need to take special classes or hire a professional fitness instructor to learn how to stroll in the park. Many of the journeys we make by car could just as easily – and sometimes more easily – be made on foot. Walking can boost fitness and guard against heart disease, stroke,



cancer and osteoporosis. And is less likely to cause injury than more strenuous exercise.

Travelling on foot can also be meditative, fostering a Slow frame of mind. When we walk, we are aware of the details around us – birds, trees, the sky, shops and houses, other people. We make connections.

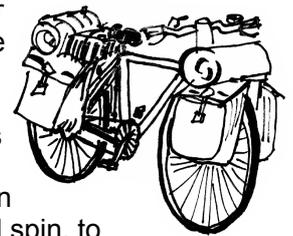
Walking can even help ease the itch to accelerate. In a car, train or plane, where the engine always holds out the promise of more power, more speed, we feel tempted to go faster, and treat every delay as a personal affront. Because our bodies come with a built-in speed limit, walking can teach us to forget our acceleration. It is inherently Slow. In the words of Edward Abbey, the enfant terrible of American environmentalism: 'There are some good things to say about walking... Walking takes longer, for example, than any other form of locomotion except crawling. Thus, it stretches time and prolongs life. Life is already too short to waste on speed... Walking makes the world much bigger and therefore more interesting. You have time to observe the details.'

Returning to Steven Harper's essay⁵, he also talks about the "mindfulness" created by slow travel –

"In wilderness, we begin to develop a sustained continuum of mindfulness. We are not necessarily focused on a single object, but rather on the stream of awareness itself. A journey through the wilderness is in itself an awareness continuum. We are invited to observe with attentiveness what emerges around each bend of the trail, what unfolds before us over each hill. This does not mean that we have forgotten or lost the past or that we do not creatively drift into the future. We are instead attentively aware of whatever awareness flows: the past, present, or future. In a sense, the means becomes the end, and our journey becomes an unfolding process to which we become attentive."

There are other ways to develop the same sense, such as cycling – where the rhythms of pedal, breath and wheels create a space for your mind to become attentive to other things. The issue about developing an independent sense of "mindfulness" is that it exists in opposition to many of the trends that exist in modern society. From political spin, to advertising, to the layout of supermarket shelving, society tries to shape your attentiveness to reflect their concerns, not yours. This concept was developed over eighty years ago by Edward Bernays, the originator of the term "public relations". He outlined the idea in his 1928 pamphlet, *Propaganda*⁷ –

"In theory, every citizen makes up his mind on public questions and matters of private conduct. In practice, if all men had to study for themselves the abstruse economic, political, and ethical data involved in every question, they would find it impossible to come to a conclusion about anything. We have voluntarily agreed to let an invisible government sift the data and high-spot the outstanding issues so that our field of choice shall be narrowed to practical proportions. From our leaders and the media they use to reach the public, we accept the evidence and the demarcation of issues bearing upon public questions."



Camping is a means to an end, not a panacea

The focus of the *Great Outdoors* initiative is communicating the most basic of skills that are essential to life – cooking, making fire, heating water and finding shelter – so that we can rediscover our potential as “human animals”; functional beings who can look after their own needs irrespective of what’s happening around them.

Andy Fisher, in his book *Radical Ecopsychology*⁸, summarises the purpose of solving our present-day problems through interacting with the natural world –

“In sum, ecopsychology is a psychological intervention aimed at contributing to the transformation of society by encouraging or providing for the recovery of our nature and our experience, for regaining the lost world-relations and life-meanings. It is an effort to remember that, and how, we are part of a big life process; to get us back into the service of all life.”

What fifty years of consumerism has done for Britain is de-skill its citizens relative to their grandparents. If we look at the practical skills of our grandparents, which at the time were taken as a normal and in many cases essential part of living, then it is clear that we have lost a large part of the “culture of living” that our society once possessed.

Given the problems that lie ahead – first with the global peak of oil production and then the far more problematic (for the UK) global peak in natural gas production – the fact many people today have only the vaguest idea of how to manage without mains services and ready-prepared food does not give confidence that this transition can be managed without strife.

Learning to camp can provide the skills, the experience, the confidence, and the psychological strength for making difficult changes to your life, but it's not solution in itself; it's not a magic gadget that you can buy and solve all your problems. What it is is a means to begin a process of change which, in present day society, can be very difficult to start because of the pressures on us to work, live and consume in certain ways. More importantly, whilst learning the skills to look after yourself with very little resources is important (and doing so without spending lots of money), it's the space and time to think that living outdoors can provide that is probably greatest force for change that this approach provides. We have to imagine change, new possibilities for living, before we are able to make them happen.

The modern mantra – “What's in it for me?”

Change is inevitable – it's actually the result of the physical laws of the universe which dictate that energy flows in only one direction. The natural order of things is that, at some point in the future, the

human species will have to become less “energetic”.

What's important is how you meet this change. Politics and the media tell us that growth, or the current global economic consensus, is the only option; this not just inaccurate, the fact is that the system that supports this point of view cannot survive the peak in global oil production. The present credit crunch was not just an issue related to “sub-prime mortgages”, but the reason people couldn't pay those mortgages in the first place was that higher fuel and food costs, generated by the lack of oil production capacity globally, ate up what little income they had and so they defaulted on their mortgages.

Whilst we can all learn the skills necessary (using a popular, if ugly, phrase) to “survive the oil crash”, what's important is that we don't just learn a new set of working practices. We must also find a new spiritual motivation to adapt to the changes that will

inevitably take place over the next few decades.

For the last fifty years the motivation of society has increasingly been the acquisition of “stuff”. Arguably this trend, at the global level, has been disastrous for both humans and the environment. Instead of acquisition we must find a new motivation for our lives, and this is

where natural systems, and the inspiration they can provide, will be critical to our future.

We can adopt camping as a simple means to learn the skills of low-impact self-reliance to deal with the problems of peak oil and peak gas. What we hope this unit has made clear is that, if we wish, we can take away something far more significant to our lives – a new state of mind and “being” to support ourselves during the difficult process of change and regeneration that lies ahead.

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