

The Beauty of the Place

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Using action learning we are searching for common ground. The beauty of the place is our starting point for working together and also a starting point for communities. We are working with three different groups of volunteers for the environment in the Blue Mountains, Blacktown and along the Cooks River to understand more about their motivations. All of these communities are on Darug land.

The Australian Heritage Commission (1999) have identified that there are cultural heritage values in landscapes, that the landscape itself holds the importance. How is the landscape of the Blue Mountains important? What is significant about the Cooks River and Blacktown Community Gardens that draws people to care for these places? Where is the place where people can change their perspectives, becoming more aware of the changes needed to sustain both natural and social life into the future?

The authors have been working together to explore these and other questions. In dialogue we explore the complexities of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people caring for the land together. Aboriginal perspectives of the landscape challenge us all to connect with the land in a deeper way.

Introduction

What makes one person oblivious to environmental degradation, to the scars left by today's society on the land, in the air, the water and the effects on plants, animals and ourselves? And yet at the same time others not only appreciate the world around them but respect and care for the place where they live, including volunteering countless hours of their time to clean-up, land care, water monitoring, interpretive tours, community gardens and wildlife rescue.

The authors have come together to explore connection to place. We wanted to collaborate, to share our experiences and learn more about what motivates people to want to make a difference. Is it related to a sense of connection? What gives us this connection? We have all worked with communities and for our own communities. In our current roles we work for state and local government and a community based organisation. Work on this paper has provided us with the opportunity to reflect on our own work as well as our own connection to place.

We began with a meeting in a little café in Springwood, in the lower Blue Mountains. One of us lives in the Blue Mountains, two on the plains, in the Western suburbs of Sydney and one lives on the coast, on Botany Bay. We started by speculating to what degree experiences of beauty in nature help motivate people to

protect and care for the environment. Conversation soon turned to water, an issue that has received a great deal of media coverage in recent times.

Each of us are concerned about water in different ways. In Nth Katoomba, the Yosemite Creek has been significantly affected by erosion and sedimentation in the catchment. In 1972, the plunge pool at the base of MiniHaHa Falls was more than 25 metres deep. It is now ankle deep. The western suburbs of Sydney are expanding to the base of the Blue Mountains. Thousands of homes are being built in an area where the amount of rainfall is noticeably less in the past couple of years. Last month the State Government extended restrictions on the domestic use of groundwater from the Botany Sands Aquifer. Ground water use in many Sydney suburbs is now banned. Jacinta explained her interest in Aboriginal perspectives on ground water.

Method

We have chosen three groups of volunteers for the environment:

- RiverLifers
- Blacktown Community Gardens
- North Katoomba – bushcarers, landcarers and community gardens volunteers

Each of these communities are connected by being on Darug land.

We asked to meet with them to ask about their connection to their local creek or river and what has made them respect and care for the environment. The questions are based on previous research conducted in relation to motivations of environmental volunteers (Kelly, et al., 2006) We then expanded the questions in order to explore connection to place and water in particular, in more depth. Reflection from Jacinta provides dialogue on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives on deeper caring for the land.

At the time of writing we are able to report on the responses of the first focus group, held with the Riverlifers in late August 2006. The call for papers for the conference was the catalyst for our coming together but our collaboration will continue and we have learnt to expect the unexpected.

The Riverlifers

One of the authors has been working with a group of volunteers who guide tours of the Cooks River in Sydney. The Riverlife Interpretive Tour Program explores the relationship between the urban environment and the Cooks River through community led activities. The tours are free and cover a variety of topics depending upon the passions of the tour guide. The program is supported by Canterbury, Marrickville and Strathfield Councils. Most recently a grant from the NSW government program, *Our Environment It's A Living Thing* has been received to support sustainability training of the Riverlife tour guides to assist in their role as community educators.

Seven of the Riverlife interpretive tour guides volunteered their time to come and talk with us and share their inspiration. We began by asking them to consider a drop of water. Where did it come from? Where is it going to? What was their

connection to it? We asked them to draw this, to express it visually and then explain what they had drawn to the rest of the group. The Riverlifers' drawings expressed diverse connections with water. "That's my open door and a pathway to the River," explained one. Other comments were: "I connect with water daily ... We need it [water] to operate in the world and to relax" and "It's part of life, DNA, my story". Some drew and referred to the water cycle: [the] cycle keeps going around, scoop a bucket of water from the river, drink, sewer, small creek, the river [again] round and round."

Respecting and caring for the environment

Common themes emerged in the Riverlifers' stories and explanations about what made them respect the environment and want to care for it. Some reflected on being young and playing outside: "I grew up in an estuarine area. It's where I learned to play and I haven't stopped doing that." Other memories were about being taken away from the city as a child: "Once I left the city, thought I had gone to heaven."

For others it was about being taught about respect for the environment. One spoke about being in the cubs and scouts. Another talked about an Aunt and Uncle who took him away camping and fishing when he was a child. Another told a story about his grandmother who was one of the people who started the National Trust.

"From an early age I was dragged around to natural areas they were trying to save. I saw things being lost and things being saved".

The participants spoke of this respect continuing into adulthood, of the need for places for recreation and for 'safe havens'. "In Sydney all the rivers run into the harbour – it's like a jewel."

Yet another theme to emerge was feeling a sense of responsibility.

"It was the visible pollution that got me first. I was curious to see what people were doing. How they were managing environmental problems in an urban area. I was impatient to find out why it doesn't look good."

They emphasised the need for their contribution. It was evident that the Riverlifers valued the Cooks River as being part of their place on earth right now. They were aware of how the River made them feel. One participant told us:

"I love the River. Rushing along the river sometimes I'm halfway along before I look up and realise where I am – and I stop and say 'sorry - hello river'. My day's completely different after that"

Two others commented that they have to do something because it's in their backyard and if they don't do something, who will?

Wanting to make a difference

We asked the group if they would be a Riverlifer on any river. Most said they cared for the Cooks River because of the terrible shape it was in. Only one said they would care for any river in the same way. This is different to the research conducted by the CSIRO which reported that:

“...participants generally felt that the activity was more important than the place and they would be able to substitute one place for another to do their environmental volunteering.” (Kelly et al., 2006: 12)

Most commented that the Cooks River needs more care because of what it has suffered. “If it was pristine I would be motivated to interact with it but maybe not to do something.” The state of the river, the visible pollution had been part of their motivation to take action. They did however also mention the importance of the social interaction, the physical activity of walking and the pleasure of leading tours, often taking people down to the river for the first time, hoping they will also learn to care for the river.

Strengthening their connection

It was evident from the group discussion that their connection with the Cooks River has strengthened as a result of caring for it. “This [being a Riverlifer] is another extension of who I am.” They spoke of the need for people to know the river, to care about it and like it for them to want to take responsibility for it. The Riverlifers noted changes to the Cooks River over the years:

“There used to be a floating sea of debris glistening in the sun. Now, sometimes you get shots of pristine water.” and

“The smell of the mud - it smells like a River.”

And finally a detail from one of the drawings:

“[The] drop equals a tear because of what humans have done and the neglect. What is beautiful could be more beautiful.”

One water for all

“In the very beginning, the Earth was formless and empty of life. The Creator Spirit, in the form of the Rainbow Spirit, shaped the land, it’s mountains, seas, rivers and trees...”

These images in our stories are essentially the same as those depicted in Genesis 1:2 and 2:4. In the beginning the earth is specifically designated as formless and empty (tohu wabohu) but covered with water. Likewise, in Genesis 2:4, the earth is depicted as a vast desert without life or form.” (Archie & Corowa, 1997: 29)

The Cooks River focus group talked about their sense of responsibility for their environment and water ways. About how they believed that they can make a

difference but mostly how their connection to place, has been strengthened through the process of caring for their environment. How their fond childhood memories of nature and the interaction with nature has stayed with them throughout their lives. Have these wonderful volunteers touched their unconscious connection to all that is?

As Aboriginal people, some of us feel the Earth in many ways. We are connected to crystal, earth, plant, insect, fish, reptile, bird, animal and of course each other. Some understand this through our Kinship system, which embraces our connection to all life here on Earth. We have a responsibility for looking after our family or Kin, which was a way of life for our people in the past, in the future and in the present.

In their book *Sing the land, signing the land*, Waston, & Chambers talk about the Yolngu people and the moieties or kinship systems *Yirritja* or *Dhuwa*. They say:

“The most important function of the system is the orderliness it imposes on the relations of individuals and groups to each other, to the land and to all things in the Ylongu world... the system determines potential marriage partners; it designates the precise parcels of land which individuals and groups ‘own’ or for which they are responsible; it provides a coherent spiritual account of the genesis of life on earth: and when combined with ‘messages’ delivered by living agents within the system, it provides practical information about which plants and animals are available for harvesting. It designates the various sets of people responsible during a burial ceremony.” (Waston, & Chambers, 1989:37)

This connection goes much further a field than just Australia and the Earth itself, it spreads across our solar system and the known universe. This connection is not just for Aboriginal people alone it is part of every life force on this beautiful planet. We as Aboriginals in our past have had time to stop and listen to our environment. We have watched it change, looked for the signs and communicated freely without a barrier of superiority but with a feeling of equality and responsibility.

It was said by one of the volunteers that she stops when passing the Cooks River and says “Hello”. This made my heart: sing to hear that she has honoured the river by giving it an acknowledgement of being a living entity.

Dr Masaru Emoto talks of an experiment that he and this team performed at Fujiwara Dam in central Japan with a Shinto priest and the photos produced by capturing the frozen water crystals.

“The priest stood on the edge of the lake and performed the incantation for about an hour, all of which I videotaped. After the incantation, the priest and I conversed; within fifteen minutes, my crew called me over.

“This is incredible! The water is getting clearer right in front of our eyes,” someone said. And it was absolutely true. You could clearly see that the water was becoming more and more transparent as we looked at it. We were even able to make out the foliage at the bottom of the lake, which had been hidden by the cloudy water.

We next took photographs of crystals. The crystals made with water from before the incantation were distorted, and looked like the face of some in great pain. But the crystals from water taken after the incantation were complete and grand.” (Emoto, 2004:90)

We as humans are made up of 70% water, which is mirrored and magnified by our planet Earth, which is made up of 70% water itself. Now through the great advancement in our science we can see the effects our actions, thoughts and words have on the micro and the macro environment we live in and are a part of. As Aboriginal we have those old ones who can still sing up the rain and have a deep understanding of our song lines. We can recreate our Garden of Eden, which has always been here and which as Aboriginal people we never left. The more we have volunteers working with the Australian environment, the closer we can come together as living being on this Earth and connect with all that is.

How to continue this work

As community educators, we frequently review our work and evaluate our time and effort against both outcomes determined by our workplaces and community committees. We also listen to the still small voice inside our hearts to check our journey. Are we listening well enough? If we are in partnership between community organisations (especially with Aboriginal community organisations) and government agencies, is this based on respect and two way learning & acknowledgement? Where is the place where people can change their perspectives, becoming more aware of the changes needed to sustain both natural and social life into the future? How do we as co-learners in this process, take these lessons to the organisations and communities we work within?

We know that one of the great motivators can be a significant transformative experience/s, such as that of John Seed (2003):

“I was gripped with an intense, profound realisation of the depth of the bonds that connect us to the earth, how deep are our feelings for these connections. I was no longer acting on behalf of myself or my human ideas, but on behalf of the earth...on behalf of my large self, that I was literally part of the rainforest defending myself.”

These sorts of experiential learning experiences are nurtured in Earth Education courses and through Earth Journeys schools programs in the Blue Mountains region. For adults, the structured educational opportunities are rarer. Bushcare provides a structured learning process but requires persistence to break through to new perspectives. Community gardens vary greatly and provide a different set of learning to value the local environment. Other motivators can be the challenges in learning about how to share what you know with others. Some Riverlifers found the training “full-on” but have found their new skills useful in helping the “grow my community – to get them to care about it.”

Blue Mountains City Council works on a priority catchment process. Sub-catchments are chosen for infrastructure work with integration between council and government agency projects. Community engagement is sought and actively

welcomed and fostered. Understanding more about motivations for community members will help Blue Mountains City Council design more appropriate programs for working effectively with its range of communities.

All of the authors will test these and other learnings with other communities with whom we are working in partnership. We will engage in a more active process of asking what motivates people in the new communities; testing whether there are different motivations. The educational programs will more consciously incorporate community perspectives and indigenous perspectives as we continue our collaboration.

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Carol Davies is studying for a Masters of Environmental Management. She works as a project officer in the Community Education Section of the Department of Environment and Conservation. She has worked with diverse groups to develop community projects and is interested in trialing action research methodologies to learn more about what brings communities together. She's lived in Australia for the last 15 years and loves the bush and the rocks and the water here, but lived for the first part of her life on the west coast of Canada, beside a roaring creek with enormous boulders and evergreen trees. This experience of having strong connections to two distinctly different environments triggered her interest in learning more about what connects people to place.

Karen Paroissien has a BA, a Bachelor of Social Studies and a Master of Education (Adult Education). She is currently enrolled in a Master of Sustainable Heritage Development at ANU. Karen has worked in community development, education and training. For the past 2 years she has worked as a Senior Education Officer with the Department of Environment and Conservation NSW, designing and managing community education projects. She has lived in Sydney most of her life and has always been close to the beach. The roar of the waves and the smell of the sea always makes her feel like she's on holidays. And a place is also its people. There are happy people at the beach. She is interested in the connection between how we are feeling and where we are - if we feel good, we learn, we're healthy, we share and we care for the environment.

Jasmine Payget has a Bachelor of Science and a MA (Environmental Studies) and works as the Environmental Education Officer at Blue Mountains City Council. Previous publications and areas of research interest are Equal employment opportunity, encouraging women into science and other non-traditional work areas, education, Sustainability, Community Participation and Open Government and Community Engagement. 'I grew up in southern Ontario in Canada next to a creek where beavers lived. Across the road were three huge maple trees whose leaves gave us lots of pleasure and whose sap gave maple syrup. Yum, a form of bush tucker?! In Australia I lived near the Cooks River and then 'discovered' the Flinders Ranges. My understanding of semi-arid landscapes changed when I had to do an assignment on the Western Myall, a fabulous acacia species. In the Blue Mountains the angophoras will be blossoming when the conference is being held. I hope to help foster a connection for conference participants to the place where the conference is held.'

Jacinta Tobin has a Master of Social Ecology and has worked in the Aboriginal Community for the last 10 years. Her passion runs deep when it comes to the unknown and spiritual matters. She has worked to raise the issues of the Child Protection; environmental destruction and the Darug people and her family's history. She is currently the Chairperson of the Darug Tribal Aboriginal Corporation. 'From the age of 5 I had lived in very extreme climates: from the bitter cold of Ballarat, Victoria where I was born, to the stark heat and humidity of Nhulunbuy on the top right hand peak of the Northern Territory overlooking the Gulf of Carpentaria. Then at the age of 4 my family moved to Darwin. It was in 1974 that I gained a healthy respect for Mother Nature, when Cyclone Tracey had come to visit on Christmas Day. We were flown down to be with my Mother's family in Sydney, NSW where we stayed and where I grew up. I went to Darwin in my twenties for a short time then returned back home to live in the Blue Mountains and now I am back living on the plains. Through understanding my Aboriginality I have come to have a stronger connection to my traditional lands of the Sydney region and take comfort when I can in the Blue Mountains.'