Textual politics and textual violence in environmental education research

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Abstract
This paper explores the textual politics of environmental education research via the ‘geosophistry’ of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, with particular reference to its application by criminologist Mark Halsey. Halsey examines the process, impact, and ethics of naming nature, focussing on the categories and thresholds used over time to map and transform a particular area of forested terrain in eastern Victoria, and the socio-ecological costs arising from these thresholds and transformations and ensuing conflicts. Halsey provides a detailed micropolitical account of the modes of envisaging and enunciating a particular geopolitical space and the ‘violence’ that make them possible. He shows how this geopolitical terrain has been textually configured over time – by Indigenous knowledges and Eurocentric laws, management plans, mining leases, etc. – and how, why and for whom these configurations produce environmental damage. Halsey demonstrates that Deleuze and Guattari’s geosophistry provides a means for keeping pace with the mobility of environmental problems by considering nature and systems of environmental regulation as discursively produced and contested. I argue that this approach engages a new ethics for categorising and regulating nature, thus challenging environmental education researchers to reconsider what it is possible to say and do about environmental problems.

An ecocritical standpoint
As an academic educator with unabashed ecopolitical commitments (see, for example, Noel Gough, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2002b), the standpoint from which I appraise policies and practices in environmental education can reasonably be characterised as ecocritical. For example, in an essay exploring principles of ecocriticism, William Howarth (1996) describes an ecocritic as ‘a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action’ (p. 69) – a characterisation with which I can readily identify. This definition is, of course, a point of departure for Howarth’s speculations and I share his reservations about its adequacy and utility. Nevertheless, it serves my purpose here, which is to draw attention to some aspects of environmental education that deserve ecocritical attention. Put briefly, environmental educators (or people who in some way identify positively with environmental education) produce many of the ‘writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature’, where ‘writing’ is understood broadly as any means of representing environments and/or environmental issues. My concern is that many environmental educators, through activities that they may conceive as ‘celebrating nature’ (or even as describing it dispassionately and objectively), might actually be despoiling and harming nature, albeit unintentionally.

I use the term ‘ecocritical literacy’ hesitantly and cautiously. Education is now so awash with ‘literacies’ – ‘environmental literacy’, ‘scientific literacy’, ‘technological literacy’, ‘computer literacy’ and so on – that the term is in danger of becoming an empty signifier. I agree with Andrew Stables and Keith Bishop (2001) that most references to environmental
literacy in the literature of environmental education exhibit a ‘weak’ conception of literacy that ignores many contemporary debates about language and literature, such as the limits of representation, referentiality and textuality. I therefore use the term ‘ecocritical literacy’ to tactically distance my project from naïve or shallow versions of environmental literacy, and to emphasise the need for environmental educators to embrace a ‘stronger’ conception of literacy that takes account of the broader ramifications of understanding environmental education as a textual practice – a practice that is susceptible to improvement through inquiries in disciplines of the arts and humanities that have tended to be undervalued in environmental education, including language arts, semiotics, literary criticism and cultural studies.

Poststructuralism, deconstruction and the ‘real’

From long experience I know that many environmental advocates and educators are antagonistic to, and/or dismissive of, poststructuralism and deconstruction. Therefore, I think that it might be wise for me to clarify my own understandings of these approaches. Charlene Spretnak (1999) typifies this antagonism when she writes:

The critical orientation known as ‘deconstructive postmodernism,’ ‘constructionism,’ or ‘constructivism’ asserts that there is nothing but ‘social construction’ (of concepts such as language, knowledge systems, and culture) in human experience…

The philosophical core of deconstructive postmodernism is the rejection of any sense of the ‘Real’… (pp. 64-5).

Spretnak (1999) discusses ‘postmodern developments’ in academia during the 1980s, and contrasts what she calls ‘the deconstructionist variety (also called “constructionism,” “constructivism,” and “poststructuralism”)’ with another perspective that ‘lacks a widely accepted umbrella term, but is sometimes called “constructive,” “reconstructive,” or “restructive” postmodernism’ (p. 223). In these passages, Spretnak uses several rhetorical strategies to distort the views of those she discredits:

- By asserting that the ‘deconstructionist’ position is ‘also called’ ‘constructionism’, ‘constructivism’ and ‘poststructuralism’, she infers that all three of these terms are synonymous with each other and with ‘deconstruction’. But I know of no scholars who identify themselves with any of these positions who would agree that they are congruent. The positions that these terms signify have clear affinities with one another but they are certainly not identical.
- She compounds the problem of equating these different positions with one another by applying one homogenising and inappropriate label to them all. But the critical orientation that she calls ‘deconstructive postmodernism’ is not (to the best of my knowledge) ‘known’ by this name to any scholars who identify themselves as poststructuralists or who practice deconstruction.
- By setting up ‘constructive’ and ‘reconstructive’ postmodernism in opposition to poststructuralism and deconstruction she implies that these latter positions are not ‘constructive’. The invented term ‘restrictive’ clearly is intended to suggest that deconstruction is destructive.
- Her insinuation that poststructuralism and deconstruction rejects any sense of the ‘Real’ distorts the positions of both structuralists and poststructuralists, who share the view that the objects, elements and meanings that constitute our ‘existential reality’ are social constructions. But what is at issue here is not belief in the real but confidence in its representation. As (Richard Rorty, 1979) puts it, ‘to deny the power to “describe” reality
is not to deny reality’ (p. 375) and ‘the world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not’ (Richard Rorty, 1989), p. 5). Representations of the world are products, artefacts or effects of particular sets of historical and linguistic practices.

**Carbon sinks as representation and ‘reality’**

Reports from The Hague World Conference on Climate Change in November 2000 provide a number of examples of the conceptual difficulties that arise when representations of environmental qualities or processes are conflated with ‘reality’. The alleged correspondence of these representations with ‘reality’ is often exaggerated by characterising them as ‘scientific facts’ or concepts. Press reports from the conference demonstrate not only that many of the conclusions that Western scientists draw about greenhouse gas emissions and global warming – such as how forests and farm crops function as ‘carbon sinks’ – are contradictory or controversial, but also that these same ‘facts’ produce different meanings for different people. For example, Simon Mann (2000) reports that ‘the definition of a forest’ was one among at least 30 areas of disagreement between negotiators from the European Union and the US and its allies (the so-called ‘umbrella’ group that includes Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand and Russia). I suspect that the impulse to attempt such a definition results from the false hope that it is possible to produce a scientific truth claim that represents the ‘reality’ of all forests in the world, and their effects on atmospheric warming, regardless of their location. But each forest’s local history and contingencies will uniquely determine the quantities of atmospheric carbon it fixes and the solar heat it absorbs and radiates.

I do not dispute the warrant for Western scientists concluding that atmospheric carbon fixing by vegetation is a variable in rates of global warming. But I question the defensibility of educational texts that suggest that the concept of a ‘carbon sink’ is now a legitimate component of ‘thinking scientifically’ about climate change. For example, within the past decade, one of the required outcomes of ‘Ecological issues: energy and biodiversity’, a unit in Victoria’s Year 12 Environmental Science course (Board of Studies Victoria, 2000) is that students ‘should be able to describe the principles of energy and relate them to the contribution of a fossil and a non-fossil energy source to the enhanced greenhouse effect’ (p. 22). To achieve this outcome, students are expected to demonstrate knowledge of ‘scientific application in options for reducing the enhanced greenhouse effect, such as Greenhouse Challenge, National Greenhouse Strategy, Kyoto protocol, emission trading and vegetation sinks’ (p. 23). The association of ‘emission trading and vegetation sinks’ with ‘scientific’ approaches to ‘reducing the enhanced greenhouse effect’ gives them a legitimacy and a ‘reality’ that they do not merit. The ‘scientific facts’ of carbon fixing by plants do not in themselves justify the metaphorical representation of forests as carbon ‘sinks’. The ‘sink’ metaphor is a rhetorical device for recruiting ‘scientific facts’ to assist the political efforts of industrialised nations to discount their greenhouse gas emissions.

By associating emission trading and carbon sinks with ‘scientific application’ and international conferences on climate change, the authors of Victoria’s Environmental Science course insinuate that these terms represent some universal environmental ‘reality’ authorised by Western science. But emission trading and carbon sinks are terms that represent political ‘realities’ – terms that allow Western politicians and bureaucrats to represent mysterious physical realities in the familiar language of economic rationalism. Examples such as these

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1 I use the term ‘mysterious’ because I suspect that very few of the people who take political positions on emission trading and on discounting emissions by counting carbon sinks – including many of the 5000 delegates from the 180 nations or more represented at The Hague World Conference on Climate Change – have even a rudimentary understanding of the molecular biology and cellular physiology of atmospheric carbon fixing by plants.
demonstrate that the discourses of environmental education deal not only with physical reality but also with the socially and culturally constructed representations of this reality.

**An (ambiguous) obsession with definition**

Questions of definition often seem to loom large for environmental educators. Consider, for example, the following extract from Mitiku Adisu’s (2005) comprehensive (and freely available) review of William Scott and Stephen Gough’s (2004) *Sustainable Development and Learning: Framing the Issues*, in which he historicises the concept of sustainable development.

Twenty years ago ‘sustainable development’ was a newly-minted notion. Unlike theorists of modernization and economic growth, the proponents of sustainable development promised that growth and environmental protection are not mutually exclusive and that one can have the cake and eat it too. Therein lay the charm – and the risk. The risk is in overlooking the fact that humans had, from time immemorial, a sense of the benefits of coexisting with the natural world and with each other. The charm is in that the new term engendered great optimism and created space for multiplicity of voices. Twenty years later, however, the promise remains as ambiguous and elusive as ever. Today, the respectability of the phrase is being contested by emerging definitions and by variant terms. Then as now, the focus of such inventiveness was decidedly to create awareness and improve the quality of life in a world of disparities and limited resources. Unfortunately, the minting of new phrases also favored those better disposed to set the global agenda (n.p).

Adisu rightly reminds us that we have already had two decades of sustainable development and that, as a concept, it remains ‘as ambiguous and elusive as ever’. But his implicit positioning of the ambiguity and elusiveness of sustainable development as a matter of troubling concern puzzles me. Why should the ‘respectability’ (a curious term to invoke here) of sustainable development be anything but ‘contested’? Although Scott and Gough (2004) begin by treating sustainable development ‘at least initially, as a set of contested ideas rather than a settled issue’ (p. 2, my emphasis) and ‘set precision aside and begin with working definitions which are as inclusive as possible’ (p. 1, authors’ original), they nevertheless ‘see definition [of both (lifelong) learning and sustainable development] as a core process of the book’ (p. 1). In other words, these writers (authors and reviewer alike) appear to be saying that contestation, ambiguity and multiplicity are conditions to be tolerated as we struggle to overcome them and eventually reach authoritative, stable and settled definitions. I agree with Adisu that Scott and Gough succeed, to a commendable degree, in bringing together many diverse perspectives on both learning and sustainable development ‘in an effort to make sense of the contradictory, the inconspicuous, and the time-constrained features of our individual and collective lives’ (n.p.), but I also fear that they succumb to universalising ambitions by regarding contestation, ambiguity and multiplicity as problems to be solved (and which are, in principle, solvable) rather than as qualities that signal marvellous potentials for an on-going, open-ended fabrication of the world.

Thus I was not particularly surprised to find that poststructuralist thought is something of a ‘blind spot’ (see Noel Gough, 2002a; Jon Wagner, 1993) for Scott and Gough and that they very largely ignore the possibilities and potentials afforded by poststructuralism and deconstruction for thinking imaginatively and creatively about socio-environmental problems. Indeed, they completely ignore deconstruction and make only two cursory references to poststructuralism, firstly in a section on ‘Language and understanding; language and action’ in which they conflate ‘post-modern’ and ‘post-structuralist’ (p. 26), and secondly in a section
titled ‘Literacies: the environment as text’ in which they uncritically reproduce an assertion they attribute to Andrew Stables (1996): ‘As structuralists and post-structuralists have pointed out, one way of looking at the world is to say that everything is a text’ (p. 29; authors’ emphasis). This appears to be an extension (and a misinterpretation) of Jacques Derrida’s often-quoted assertion that ‘there is nothing outside the text’, which is in turn a somewhat misleading translation of ‘Il n’y a pas de hors-texte’ (literally, ‘there is no outside-text’). But Derrida was not, as some of his critics insisted, denying the existence of anything outside of what they (the critics) understood as texts; his claim was not that ‘il n’y a rien hors du texte’ – that the only reality is that of things that are inside of texts. Rather, his point was that texts are not the sorts of things that are bounded by an inside and an outside, or ‘hors-texte’: ‘nothing is ever outside text since nothing is ever outside language, and hence incapable of being represented in a text’ (Jacques Derrida, 1976, p. 35).

**Textual violence and environmental law**

Mark Halsey (2006) begins his book, *Deleuze and Environmental Damage: Violence of the Text*, as follows:

> one of the key purposes of this book is to offer a micropolitical account of the evolution of such taken-for-granted concepts as ‘Nature’, ‘sustainability’, and ‘environmental harm’. For what law prescribes as permissible in respect of Nature, and *ipsó facto*, what it deems to be ecologically criminal, is intimately linked to how such terms have been spoken of, imagined, and otherwise deployed over time. To believe other than this is to turn away from the ethical, and at times violent, dimensions that go along with speaking and writing the world (p. 2)

Thus, Halsey’s book critically examines the process, impact, and ethics of naming nature, focussing specifically on the categories and thresholds used over time to map and transform a particularly area of forested terrain, namely, the Goolengook forest block in far eastern Victoria, and the socio-ecological costs arising from these thresholds and transformations and ensuing conflicts. Although Halsey is a criminologist, his study is not specifically about ‘crime’ or even ‘environmental crime’:

> It is instead about the ways such terms as ‘harm’, ‘sustainability’, ‘ecological significance’, ‘value’, and ‘right’, have been coded, decoded, and recoded by various means, at various times, with particular results. Further, this is not a study about ‘justice’ – at least, not in the transcendental sense of the term. But it is most certainly about the ways law marks the earth. More particularly, it is about the composition of the various knowledges law calls upon to justify its ‘justness’, its ‘rightness’, and its ‘comprehensivity’ when it permits, for instance, the conversion of a 10,000 year old ecosystem into scantling for houses or paper for copying machines (pp. 2-3).

Halsey provides a very detailed account of the modes of envisaging and enunciating the particular geopolitical space now known as Goolengook forest block over time and the ‘violence’ that make these visions and enunciations possible – the ‘violence borne by way of the slow and largely inaudible march of the categories and thresholds associated with using and abusing Nature’ (p. 3, author’s emphasis).

Typically, accounts of the conflict over Goolengook (and other forest conflicts) are rendered as variants on David and Goliath narratives: greenies versus loggers, or greenies versus government, or sometimes loggers versus government. Halsey contends that stories based on such dichotomies fail to articulate sufficiently the subtleties and nuances
contributing to forest conflict as event – as ‘something which is both a discursive invention (i.e. an object of our policies, laws, imaginings) and a body consistently eluding efforts to frame, categorise, think, speak – in short, represent, “its” aspects’ (p. 3).

Halsey applies poststructuralist concepts, especially the work of Deleuze and Guattari, to demonstrate that the conflicts at Goolengook are about something much more than ‘forests’ (Australian or otherwise) – they also raise critical questions about subjectivity (who we are), power (what we can do), and desire (who we might become). The struggles at Goolengook also raise questions about the ontological consistency and ecopolitical utility of categories such as ‘we’, ‘society’, ‘global’, ‘environment’, ‘forest block’, ‘old-growth’, ‘truth’, ‘harm’, ‘right’, ‘crime’ and so on. Halsey clearly shows how the geopolitical terrain of Goolengook has been textually configured over time – by Indigenous knowledges, law, management plans, mining leases, etc. – and how, why and for whom this textual configuration ‘works’.

Following Deleuze and Guattari, Halsey argues that places like Goolengook become – they are always already invented, fabricated, although they are no less ‘real’ for being so. He suggests that the process of ‘becoming-known’, ‘becoming-forest’ (or, for that matter, becoming-uranium mine, becoming-housing estate, becoming-hydro-electric dam, etc.), and thus of ‘becoming-contested’, is intimately related to what he calls four ‘modalities’ of nature involving the way nature is envisioned, the way nature is named, the speed at which nature is transformed, and the affect (image, concept, sense) of nature that is subsequently produced (p. 229). These modalities always already harbour an ethic linked to the production of a life (or lives) and/or a death (or deaths). For example, the Australian Federal Government envisions ‘forest’ to mean ‘an area… dominated by trees having usually a single stem and a mature stand height exceeding 5 metres’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992, p. 47). Envisioning ‘forest’ in terms of trees exceeding 5 metres – rather than, say, 20 meters – has significant consequences for biodiversity, employment, resource security, research and development, and so on.

Unnaming nature

Ursula Le Guin (1987) demonstrates how we might use words to subvert the contemporary politics of ‘naming nature’. In one of her short stories, aptly titled ‘She Unnames Them’, Le Guin mocks and subverts the biblical assertion that ‘Man gave names to all the animals’. In this story Eve collaborates with the animals in undoing Adam’s work: ‘Most of them accepted namelessness with the perfect indifference with which they had so long accepted and ignored their names’ (p. 195). In ‘She Unnames Them’ Le Guin demonstrates the practicality of some insights that we can draw from relating deep ecology to semiotics. Modern science maintains clear distinctions between subject and object and, thus, between humans and other beings, plant and animal, living and non-living, and so on. These distinctions are sustained by the deliberate act of naming, which divides the world into that which is named and everything else. Naming is not just a matter of labelling distinctions that are already thought to exist. Assigning a name to something constructs the illusion that what has been named is genuinely distinguishable from all else. In creating these distinctions, humans can all too easily lose sight of the seamlessness of that which is signified by their words and abstractions. So, in Le Guin’s (1987) story, Eve says:

None were left now to unname, and yet how close I felt to them when I saw one of them swim or fly or trot or crawl across my way or over my skin, or stalk me in the night, or go along beside me for a while in the day. They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier... (p. 196)
We could do with some creative unnaming in our work. We could start with some of the common names of animals and plants that signify their instrumental value to us rather than their kinship. There is a vast difference between naming a bird of the Bass Strait islands (between Tasmania and mainland Australia) an ‘ocean going petrel’ or a ‘shearwater’ and naming it a ‘mutton bird’. Only one of these names identifies a living thing in terms of its worth to us as dead meat.

Names are not inherent in nature; they are an imposition of human minds. It is as if we wish to own the earth by naming it. We corrupt education by naming parts – by constructing illusions that suggest that meaningful distinctions can be made between ‘facts’ and ‘values’, or between ‘perception’ and ‘cognition’, or that ‘arts’, ‘humanities’ and ‘sciences’ are separate ‘subjects’ (when we treat them as objects anyway). Furthermore, we cannot reconstruct the whole by ‘integrating’ the names. Integration in education is a desperate attempt to recapture the wholeness that has been lost through naming. Unnaming our professional identities as ‘environmental’ or ‘outdoor’ or ‘health’ or ‘science’ educators is one way in which we might establish closer connections and continuities with one another and with the earth. Unnaming makes it harder to explain ourselves—we can’t chatter away as we’re so used to doing, hearing only our own words making up the world, taking our names and what they signify all for granted.

In Always Coming Home, Le Guin (1986) offers another critical perspective on modern scientific techniques of observing and interpreting nature through a meditation on scrub oak:

Look how messy this wilderness is. Look at this scrub oak, chaparro, the chaparral was named for it … there are at least a hundred very much like it in sight from this rock I am sitting on, and there are hundreds and thousands and hundreds of thousands more on this ridge and the next ridge, but numbers are wrong. They are in error. You don’t count scrub oaks. When you count them, something has gone wrong. You can count how many in a hundred square yards and multiply, if you’re a botanist, and so make a good estimate, a fair guess, but you cannot count the scrub oaks on this ridge, let alone the ceanothus, buckbrush, or wild lilac, which I have not mentioned, and the other variously messy and humble components of the chaparral. The chaparral is like atoms and the components of atoms: it evades. It is innumerable. It is not accidentally but essentially messy… This thing is nothing to do with us. This thing is wilderness. The civilised human mind’s relation to it is imprecise, fortuitous, and full of risk. There are no shortcuts. All the analogies run one direction, our direction… Analogies are easy: the live oak, the humble evergreen, can certainly be made into a sermon, just as it can be made into firewood. Read or burnt. Sermo, I read; I read scrub oak. But I don’t, and it isn’t here to be read, or burnt.

It is casting a shadow across the page of this notebook in the weak sunshine of three-thirty of a February afternoon in Northern California. When I close the book and go, the shadow will not be on the page, though I have drawn a line around it; only the pencil line will be on the page. The shadow will then be on the dead-leaf-thick messy ground or on the mossy rock… and the shadow will move lawfully and with great majesty as the earth turns. The mind can imagine that shadow of a few leaves falling in the wilderness; the mind is a wonderful thing. But what about all the shadows of all the other leaves on all the other branches on all the other scrub oaks on all the other ridges of all the wilderness? If you could imagine those even for a moment, what good would it do? Infinite good (pp. 239-41).

**An example: Lyell Forest pedagogy**

A number of my colleagues have developed pedagogies of place that converge with those that I see as being implied by Halsey and Le Guin. For example, Alistair Stewart (2003; 2004a;
2004b; 2006) has focused on place-conscious natural history with particular reference to the Murray River and its environs. Similarly, Andrew Brookes (2000; 2002a; 2002b; 2004; 2005) has argued cogently for ‘situationist’ outdoor education that develops deep consciousness of particular places. I borrow extensively from his account of developing an appropriate pedagogy for the Lyell Forest as a site for learning to demonstrate how different modalities of nature may be enacted through different pedagogical choices.

Brookes (2005) begins his discussion of relationships between outdoor activities and environmental learning by considering the example of ‘bushwalking’ as a cultural practice in Victoria. From the early 1900s small numbers or city-dwelling Australians sought to understand the bush through bushwalking in their leisure time, often with clubs. It is clear from the published journals of bushwalkers in the early post-war period that bushwalking was a knowledge-based activity: bushwalking clubs, at least to a degree, socially constructed knowledge of the region. Clubs helped this knowledge to gain meaning by providing a place where stories of past experiences could be told and plans for future visits made. Tales of exploration and discovery run through many accounts, but the dominant theme was of individually and collectively building experience of the bush regions around Melbourne. Bushwalking maintained and passed on experiential knowledge through programs of walks that formed loose patterns of repetition and geographical coverage (see Brookes, 2002b, p. 410-411).

With the development of outdoor education and formal bushwalking courses since the 1970s came bushwalking with a different emphasis. In formal education, bushwalking became an activity for its own sake, or a technical exercise. The change could clearly be seen in approaches to navigation:

At least in the early years, the bushwalker was someone who ‘knew the bush’. Accurate topographic maps were not available, and bushwalking clubs allowed knowledge to be shared, through written accounts of trips, contacts with local stockmen who grazed cattle in the bush under licence, sketch maps made on previous trips, and above all through providing relationships with experienced and trusted individuals…

In contrast, when bushwalking became part of formal education there was more emphasis on technical navigation… Topographic map-reading and navigation using a compass became central to bushwalking instruction. Maps originally developed for the military provided information that enabled the technically competent to plan a bushwalk as a strategic exercise in unknown terrain. .

At two extremes, navigation can be approached using the knowledge and world view of an invading military force with no local knowledge but advanced technology, or from the perspective of a local defending force with little technology but who know the country. The sport of orienteering – competitive cross country navigation, based on maps using standardised information similar to military maps, and with very little if any local cultural information, contains within it an invader’s perspective of the land as a strange place, offering strategic challenges than can be overcome with strength and skill. This might be contrasted with older traditions of mountain guiding, earlier forms of bushwalking, and aboriginal ways of knowing, in which local experience was essential (Brookes, 2002b, p. 418).

To consider the question of some implications of different ways of knowing the Victorian bush, one must be specific. There is not one Victorian environment, but many. Brookes (2005) offers the following examples to illustrate the importance of details in understanding first how outdoor activities help shape and distribute knowledge in communities, but also why
one might choose one kind of activity over another for the sake of contributing to local environmental education.

The Lyell forest near Bendigo is nearly perfect for technical navigation training. The vegetation is not too thick to prevent running, the topography has just the right complexity and subtlety, and there are boundaries that prevent any person from becoming really lost. It is well-known as a place for orienteering. The Lyell forest is not the kind that would attract bushwalkers. It is small, and has no water. Bushwalking has tended to favour some landscapes over others. Measured against the standards of beauty often applied to the bush by bushwalkers, the Lyell forest would seem drab and uninteresting. Moreover, the forest bears the scars of many different uses and abuses since the 1850s, so does not fit the imported American ideal of untouched wilderness which has found favour in Australia, in spite of the fact, or perhaps because of the fact, that it conveniently ignores aboriginal occupation of the land.

The Lyell forest is part of the Box-Ironbark group of forest types found mostly inland of the mountain range along the east coast of Australia. Between 3% and 45% of the different types of Box-Ironbark vegetation remain compared to 1750, and those remnants have been altered a great deal since 1750. The impact of European settlement on Australia can be thought of as rocks thrown in a still pool that caused ripples which continue to spread. But new rocks are also being thrown in the pool, causing still more ripples. The ‘ripples’ now moving through the once still ‘pool’ of the Box-Ironbark forests are too many to list in detail but to mention a few: very little forest remains along streams or rivers – it is almost all along ridges, which has had consequences for the rivers, and also for the wildlife that lives in the forest; trees have been cut down faster than they can grow back and there are few large old trees in the forests; the forests are mainly in small fragments, so although they are mostly government owned, they are difficult to manage compared to the large blocks of land that can be managed as a national park. Taking a wider view, the forests are almost all within the catchment of the Murray-Darling river system, which supports 60% of Australian agriculture and faces many problems, some of which depend in a practical way on how those living in the Box-Ironbark areas treat the land, and some of which depend in a political way on how those living in the Box-Ironbark area understand the land. None of these facts determine what people should or should not do in the forests, but they do indicate what may be at stake in the relationship between the community and forest.

Different outdoor activities provide lenses to see the forests through. Orienteering favours certain topographic qualities, mapped features (but usually not cultural features such as names), and terrain where running is possible. Orienteers prefer an area that is not familiar to them. Once an area has been mapped the map may be used many times, but symbolically at least orienteering resembles the search for new land ‘beyond the frontier. Fossickers have a different perception; they see a historical landscape, and concentrate on where gold was found in the gold rushes of the nineteenth century. But they also look for ‘new ground’ in a way, because they hope to find places where other modern fossickers have not used their metal-detectors. Bee-keepers develop particular local knowledge, especially about the trees; different species produce different honey, at different times, and older trees produce more nectar. Moreover, a fox-shooter may also be an orienteer on occasions. An apiarist may be a naturalist, or may collect firewood. Even these few examples and few details are sufficient to show that outdoor activities create complex maps of knowledge of the forest within the community.

Within each of these ways of knowing are tensions between technical skills and personal experience, and between taking some benefit from the forest, and becoming familiar with the forest. Not only will individuals learn different things about the forest according to what activity they have chosen, but also the meaning of that knowledge will be shaped by the
activity. In outdoor education, the question arises whether an activity can be shaped to develop particular knowledge or to create meaning.

For example, forests like the Lyell Forest have a relatively small number of old trees. Boxes and Ironbarks are slow growing, requiring centuries to reach large sizes in some locations. Hollows, which are essential for much of the wildlife, particularly some of the mammals, but also some birds and goannas, form slowly in these trees. Much of the wildlife is nocturnal, and local people may be unaware of what lives in the forest or of the importance of hollow trees. The outdoor activity Brookes has introduced to students (who are training to be outdoor education teachers) has a simple premise. Students take a small area of forest and get to know the hollow trees in the area. The process begins in the first year of their course, requires that they spend several nights in the forest, and encourages them to spend more. They must learn what lives in the trees in a respectful, unobtrusive way. They may observe, but are allowed no trapping, spotlighting, banging on trees, playing recorded mating calls, feeding, or intrusive viewing (such as climbing trees to inspect holes in daylight). They must learn to see signs of wildlife, and must wait until the creatures show themselves. The purpose of this activity is to teach students how an activity may be constructed which in a small way could weave some important, but neglected aspects of the forest into the lives of local people.

The activity has a different structure to bushwalking – students walk from tree to tree, looking for scratches on the bark and signs of hollow branches. They arrange their day so that in the evening they can quietly watch a tree to see what creatures emerge. Many of the animals which live in the trees only come out at night, which, combined with the fact they hide in hollows, means that for many local people they barely exist. Thus for the students the activity makes the forest come to life in a particular way.

A single activity may teach some facts, but it is important that students understand how an on-going relationship changes the meaning of an activity. Students who have visited an area more than once recognise things they have seen before, and notice changes. They not only learn about wildlife and its relationship to the trees, but they connect what they have seen with personal stories. Students who expect to visit again have a reason to remember what they learn. Brookes and his colleagues use a simple device to introduce this social aspect of learning. Students in the first year of their course are introduced to a small area of forest by final year students, over three days and nights. They visit the forest on several more occasions over the next two years. Then in their final year, they in turn introduce a group of first year students to ‘their’ piece of forest.

A map of students’ movements through the forest would show a very different pattern from that of an orienteer visiting checkpoints, or a bushwalker passing through. The rhythm of activity is also different, because it has to take into account the schedule the wildlife sets. Instead of all meeting at ‘dinner time’ students disperse to watch different trees at dusk. The activity also has some clearly evident social signatures. Students walk without maps, and speak of places in a slightly old-fashioned way: ‘the goanna tree’; ‘the Red Box tree where we saw the sugar gliders’; ‘the echidna stump’, and so on. When groups meet in the forest at least some of their conversations is an exchange of stories about what they have seen. Thus wildlife becomes part of their socialisation, in a similar way to stories about sporting events on the weekend having a social function in the work place.

It is the weaving of knowledge about wildlife with personal stories and a social relationship that makes this activity a little more like an indigenous way of knowing, and a little less like a field trip for a science class or walking for sport. Brookes has called the activity a recreation activity because for some students at least it provides the same interest and motivation as recreation; some have returned many times to watch ‘their’ trees. However, it is also a modest program, and it is important to note that it is more successful on some
occasions than others. Which groups should undertake what activities where, if Australians are to learn how to live sustainably in Australia, is a much bigger question.

References


