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Dancing with nature: Rhythm and harmony in extreme sport participation

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Abstract

Research on extreme sports has downplayed the importance of the athletes' connection to the natural world. This neglect stems, in part, from the assumption that these activities derive their meaning primarily from risk. The authors' long-term research reveals that the interplay between adventure athletes and the natural world is, in fact, crucial for many participants. This study used hermeneutic and phenomenological analysis of first-hand accounts of these sports and interviews with fifteen veteran participants. These included B.A.S.E. jumpers, big wave surfers, extreme skiers, waterfall kayakers, extreme mountaineers and solo rope-free climbers. Participants spoke extensively about developing a deep relationship with the natural world akin to an intimate "dance" between actively engaged partners. Our experience-based analysis has found that extreme sports aficionados do not simply view the natural world as a commodity, a stage for risk taking, or vehicle for self-gratification. On the contrary, for veteran adventure athletes the natural world acts as a facilitator to a deeper, more positive understanding of self and its place in the environment. For some, nature was described as omnipresent and ubiquitous, and a source of innate power and personal meaning. The authors explore how these findings may augment the delivery of more "eco-centric" programs in the outdoor adventure field.

Introduction

*When we try to pick out anything in itself,
we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.
(John Muir cited in Warrawee'a, 2002, p. 95)*

For the most part, contemporary, Western discussions on the human relationship with the natural world are an anthropocentric proposition that views nature as separate from humanity (Schultz, 2002). From this perspective nature appears to be inanimate, providing a resource, medium or place for human action, an obstacle for conquering, or a play-ground for exhilaration and natural "highs". An extreme version of this standpoint is a Cartesian treatment of nature as simply a type of machine valued only for its worth to humanity (Wilshire, 1997). For some writers with a focused curiosity about the relationship between humanity and nature, the natural world has been afforded intrinsic value for its own sake and is often seen as a place of worship and worthy of stewardship. In this instance nature is described as a sanctuary, refuge, sacred reservoir or natural reserve (Gray, 2005; Shoham, Rose, & Kahle, 2000; Slattery, 2001), but still separate from humanity (Martin, 2009). In contrast, for other researchers the natural world is deeply connected to humanity and described as an intimate partner or an extension of the self where humanity is seen as an integral part of a greater whole (Birrell, 2001; Martin, 2009; Schultz, 2002). These tensions are often reflected in theoretical perspectives on outdoor and adventure education (Nicol, 2003; Stremba & Bisson, 2009).

In order for educators to maximize the learning potential of outdoor activity, we must come to better “understand the psychological and emotional connections between humans and the natural world” (Stremba & Bisson, 2009, p. 345) and how these connections might be facilitated. Although unfounded prejudice may lead some in our field to disregard extreme sports as part of outdoor education, the multi-faceted account of extreme athletes’ experiences that emerges once they are placed under the analytical microscope may help us to better reach out to this significant public.

Whatever the motives that initially attract participants to extreme sports, their own accounts of why they find these activities compelling show a change over time. Rather than an egocentric focus on personal achievement or triumph over nature, we find instead a deeper reflection on eco-centricity and connectedness with nature. Although they may first jump from cliffs or enter big waves or ride waterfalls for more shallow personal motives, they often find over time that they are, as John Muir too realized, ‘hitched to everything else in the universe’ (John Muir in Warrawee’a, 2002, p. 95). If this trajectory of growing awareness is typical, outdoor educators may find allies in the extreme sport community rather than philosophical adversaries.

Defining Extreme Sports

Although a cluster of increasingly popular sports fall under the general heading of ‘extreme’, arriving at a universal definition of the term can be a challenge as the boundaries of what counts as ‘extreme’ are ambiguous. Brymer (2005) defines extreme sports as outdoor leisure activities where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death. Over the past two decades, participation rates in these sports have grown exponentially. According to Puchan (2004) involvement has “been shown not to be just a ‘flash in the pan’ but a sign of the times in which people are looking for a new way to define their lives and to escape from an increasingly regulated and sanitised way of living” (Puchan, 2004, P. 177).

The activities that most clearly fall under this definition of ‘extreme sports’ are B.A.S.E. jumping (Buildings, Antennae, Space, Earth), extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, big wave surfing, high-level mountaineering and climbing without ropes or ‘free solo’ climbing. B.A.S.E. jumping, for instance, in which participants jump from solid structures such as cliffs, bridges or buildings, is considered to be the most extreme of the parachute sports (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Soreide, Ellingsen, & Knutson, 2007). Whilst skydivers use safety devices such as warning technology and second parachutes, B.A.S.E. jumpers cannot employ warning devices or second parachutes because they simply will not function given B.A.S.E. conditions. B.A.S.E. jumping is arguably one of the most extreme of extreme sports (Soreide et al., 2007). As one B.A.S.E. jumper put it: ‘There are no second chances’ (James, male B.A.S.E. jumper, early 70’s).

Extreme skiing involves skiing down sheer cliffs or very steep grades where a fall results in the skier tumbling out of control. Waterfall kayaking occurs in waterways rated at the highest grade on the international white-water grading system. The highest waterfalls, for example, are at least thirty metres tall, and again a mistake would most likely result in death. Big wave surfing takes surfers into waves over twenty feet tall, where even some of the most renowned surfers have died (Warshaw, 2000).

Traditionally, critics have assumed that these sports are motivated by a thrill-seeking willingness to take unnecessary risks, show that one has ‘No Fear’ or pursue a ‘death-wish’ that these critics have denounced. Theorists have presented explanations for participation including an innate and perhaps pathological drive (Rossi & Cereatti, 1993; Schroth, 1995; Self, Henry, Findley, & Reilly, 2007; Zuckerman, 2000) or a socially unacceptable learnt

behaviour (Hunt, 1995, 1996). However, more recently researchers following a phenomenological tradition have argued that extreme sports might enable more positive experiences (Brymer, 2009; Brymer & Oades, 2009; Willig, 2008). In this paper we explore one particular experience: the encounter between extreme athletes and the natural-world.

Extreme sports and the natural world

Extreme sports are often represented as the ultimate demonstration of humanity's power and control, a bold assertion that even nature's most basic laws do not apply to the athlete (Millman, 2001). Writers who explicitly discuss the relationship between extreme sports and the natural world consider sport participation to be an expression of an innate human drive to conquer or battle against nature as part of identity formation or a demonstration of personal power (Celsi et al., 1993; Millman, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1999). This portrayal of extreme sports as a confrontation between participants and the natural world assumes that humanity is separate from the natural world, and as the distance grows, the natural world becomes a threat to fear and control (Schultz, 2002; Stilgoe, 2001).

Millman (2001) considered participation in extreme sports to be the epitome of naïveté and nihilism that stems from self-indulgence. His argument is that, as society leads people to feel powerless and insignificant, people search for ways to prove to themselves that they are, in fact, potent and in command of their own destinies. Le Breton (2000) considered the extreme sport experience to be the ultimate hand-to-hand fight, where a participant's battle against nature somehow adds importance and value to their life.

Both critiques of extreme sports as unnecessary risk taking and accounts of a quest for individual feelings of power suggest that the *essential* relationship between the natural world and the extreme athlete is to *battle* against or attempt to *conquer* or *vanquish* part of the natural world. In these accounts of extreme sports, the natural world has only anthropocentric worth, that is, it is recognized only for its use or value to humanity.

Dancing with nature

Our research findings suggest that the relationship between athletes and nature is not purely anthropocentric, about conquering or conflict, but rather built upon a recognition of an integrating process or journey (Olsen, 2001). The criticism that extreme sports participants are out to conquer the natural world may be more a reflection of how a naïve non-participant of extreme sports or even a novice practitioner understands the relationship as opposed to an inherent element of the extreme sport experience.

The metaphor of 'dance' recognises a dynamic, rhythmical, harmonious, fluid and responsive interplay between the extreme sport participant and nature. Dance may also be characterized as a partially inexpressible, emotionally filled experience (Dieneske, 2000) involving intentional and creative movement, like a choreography (Lane, 2005). The dance metaphor embraces the holistic experience of extreme athletes within nature. Engaging in extreme sports (just like dance) is a transformational experience for some participants that taps into the emotional, spiritual and physical realms.

Any study of the meaning of extreme sports must recognize that people's understandings evolve over time. Rowe (2008) cautions that "the ephemeral nature of dance, existing as it does 'in the moment', accentuates how shared understandings in dialogue do not constitute finalized, static representations" (Rowe, 2008, p.50). Even our findings are a window in on one stage of an emerging worldview, shaped by ongoing interactions with nature. The potency of nature is articulated by Uhlik (2006) when he says "nature continually impresses humans in its role as an omnipresent, if not ultimate, source of power" (Uhlik, 2006, p. 135).

For this reason, we suspect that we are detailing a sophisticated, veteran perception of the activity, one that some participants may never develop. Part of our reason for discussing this view is to encourage outdoor educators to assist people to reach this integrated eco-centric stage of understanding. Prematurely dismissing the inherent value of these activities because novices' motives appear suspect may serve to crystallize less well-developed understandings and discourage the emergence of eco-centric consciousness.

In this paper, part of a larger hermeneutic phenomenological investigation of extreme sports, the authors explored this particular eco-centric relationship between extreme sports participation and nature by asking the question, 'How does the extreme sports participant relate to the natural world?' We discuss participants' descriptions of a relationship they characterized as a harmonious and rhythmical interaction between partners, an engagement some likened to a 'dance.' Through 'dancing' with the natural world, an extreme sports participant generally undergoes a transformation in self-understanding at the same time that his or her view of nature also changes.

The findings presented in this paper are particularly significant because the research project did not initially set out to explore the relationship between extreme sport participation and the natural world; this theme only emerged from the ongoing hermeneutic analysis of interview transcripts over the course of the project. Equally, the researchers "bracketed" or suspended in advance any presuppositions about the relationship between extreme sports and risk, allowing subject interviews to shape our emerging interpretation. The researchers were surprised that risk did not play a more important role in our analysis, at first, until we recognized that the absence of this theme was indicative of the type of eco-centric worldview that many veteran athletes achieved.

Methodology

Interview participants

Fifteen participants (ten men and five women) from Europe, Australia and U.S.A., aged 30 to 70 years, agreed to be interviewed for this study. Participants were recruited for three reasons. Firstly, they were identified as participating in one of the extreme sports that the research investigated. Secondly, they demonstrated a desire to unpack or analyse their own extreme sport experiences. Thirdly, all subjects were outside the age group typically discussed in the literature about alternative sports, some of them significantly older than the demographic associated with high-risk behaviour. This third criterion was crucial to the project to counter a tendency in previous research to focus predominantly on the supposed 'core' participant group: young people. By recruiting outside this 'core,' we sought to increase our understanding of diversity and longitudinal change in extreme sport experience (Donnelly, 2006).

Following a phenomenological strategy, participants were chosen for the sake of the phenomenon rather than according to an arbitrary sampling procedure (Van Kaam, 1966). We recruited participants for their ability to explore and articulate their experience, not for their prior knowledge of the phenomenological framework. Other data sources, including firsthand accounts in the form of autobiographies, biographies, academic papers and video, were resourced from around the world, including India, China, Taiwan and Nepal. These published materials allowed the researchers to cross-check themes that were emerging in the interviews to make sure that the interview questions were not stimulating atypical or idiosyncratic accounts. The extreme sports included B.A.S.E. jumping, big wave surfing, extreme skiing, extreme kayaking, extreme mountaineering and solo rope-free climbing. Participants of alternative, lifestyle or sub-culture sports that did not fit the definition outlined earlier,

including the same activities at a level where death would be unlikely or impossible, were not included, nor were practitioners of sports such as skateboarding and BMX although they are sometimes referred to popularly as 'extreme sports'.

The first author conducted focused conversations with all fifteen extreme sport participants either face-to-face or by phone. Open-ended questions elicited experiences in an unstructured way, allowing subjects to focus on the themes that were most important to them. 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?*' Further open-ended questions encouraged deeper reflection of subjects on their personal experiences, asking them to clarify and comment upon their own statements.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is both descriptive and interpretive. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach used in this research project aims to investigate an experience as it is lived and demands the use of a multitude of data sources for exploring a phenomenon like extreme sports (van Manen, 1997). The researchers examined a wide range of materials in addition to interviews in an effort to understand the nature of a particular experience and to assure that some accounts are originating outside the interview setting. Phenomenological research achieves rigor, in part, by 'bracketing' or setting aside pre-existing understandings and by comparing among a variety of accounts to see if dimensions of the experience recur across multiple subjects (Giorgi, 1997).

The first stage of the interview analysis involved listening to each tape immediately following the interview and repeatedly rereading interview transcripts in relation to each other (Amlani, 1998; Ettling, 1998). Each individual transcript was read and thematically analysed as a separate entity although 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?' and 'What am I missing?' guided the intuiting and analytical process.

The analysis considered both verbal and non-verbal aspects of the interviews. The researchers highlighted interesting phrases and any relevant non-verbal considerations. Accepting Steinbock's (1997, p.127) argument that phenomenological descriptions are not about reproducing 'mere matters of fact or inner feelings,' 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 videos, biographies and autobiographies.

The quotes throughout the paper illustrate themes drawn from a variety of our sources. They are chosen because, although typical, the passages present a particularly articulate or eloquent instance of a theme that was more widespread in our interviews and other research. Where the source was an interview rather than a published account or video, we have changed names in order to maintain confidentiality.

Results and discussions

In the interviews and other research, we found participants in extreme sports specifically reflecting on the widespread idea that these athletes seek to conquer nature, either to carve out a particular identity or in order to prove themselves. The analysis of participants' accounts has led us to question this stance and present a viewpoint that is both more consistent with athletes' views and that may enhance potential collaboration with the outdoor education field.

A. On conquering

Many discussions of extreme sports assume that athletes seek to conquer elements of the environment. In contrast, Charles Houston (1968), an experienced Himalayan expedition climber and surgeon, was quite clear that the relationship between climber and mountain could not be that of conqueror to 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).

Similarly, a white-water kayaker, recalling a trip in Russia, evidenced analogous respect for rivers:

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]).

This recognition that, no matter how successful the athlete, the natural force will register no reaction, no lasting impression, humbles many participants in extreme sports. Page (2003), for example, wrote that big waves pay no attention to the surfers riding them and by implication would not even know that a competition was taking place. Given the transience of the athlete's passage through the natural world, participants often come to recognize the overwhelming power of nature.

B. The dance

Participants suggest that a more appropriate understanding of the relationship is an interaction *with* the environment as partner, likened by some to a metaphorical 'dance.' Lynn Hill, an extreme climber, reported that climbing required, not domination, but rather 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, only by achieving 'a harmonious relationship to the rock,' can an extreme climber progress at all (Hill cited in Olsen, 2001, p. 60). 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.

Similarly, Midol and Broyer (1995) characterized the human-nature relationship as interacting and blending with the environment to the point that participants perceive parts of nature as agents with which they negotiate and, ultimately, identify.

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).

The difficulty of describing this unusual state leads participants and observers to grasp for the language of myth and mysticism.

In their research on high-risk sports, Slanger and Rudestam (1997) specifically describe the partnership as a state akin to a dance, drawing on the account of one of their informants:

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).

This climber highlights that the dawning connection to nature occurs not simply in retrospect but in the movements of the athletic activity themselves. Slanger and Rudestam found this pattern of satisfying bodily engagement across a range of activities:

Climbers spoke of the feeling of movement and rhythmical pleasure of the experience. Aerobic 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).

Rather than focusing on risk or a sense of personal efficacy or conquest, these athletes dwelled on the pleasure derived from their immersion in the environment and their own action.

For Helen, a mountaineer, the experience engaged all her senses as well as what she called 'intuition' which she described as being in touch with herself.

It's all senses and perhaps also intuition, because you are more in touch with yourself as well in those situations which can be dangerous situations. You tend to be very in tune with your environment and that means that you are going to react very intuitively, I suppose, to what's around you (Helen, female mountaineer, mid 30's).

Helen explained the heightened self-awareness of intuitive activity later as moving in the environment, not controlling the environment.

Booth (2003, p. 316) likened surfing big waves to a dance 'to and with a natural energy form.' Sam, an extreme kayaker in his late 30's, described feeling as if he and the waterfall were travelling together in a sort of 'flow': 'I feel that I'm going with the flow of the waterfall and it's letting me out at the bottom and I'm still in the hands of the waterfall, it's going along with me.'

Guilar (1999) drew similarities between the kayaking experience and a dance; he cautions that, should the dance turn to competition or fight, then the likely result would be death. Charles Houston (1968) echoes this warning, suggesting that the challenge is to overcome self-imposed obstacles rather than the environment:

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).

Rather than an addictive rush of adrenaline, Houston suggests that his feeling of ‘dancing’ with the natural world, transcending a ‘previous self,’ provides an addictive form of self-revelation. Other accounts describe a similar paradox, that engagement with and adaptation to the environment actually provides greater internal awareness and introspective insight.

It’s all about learning to adapt totally to the environment you’re in. I think it provides the perfect opportunity for learning about what makes you tick. When you’re that involved in the external world, you can really explore your inner nature (Hill cited in Olsen, 2001, p. 66).

Pushed by their engagement with the environment, extreme athletes sometimes find unrecognized resources within their own character. Vicky, a B.A.S.E. jumper in her late 30s, highlighted this paradox in stark terms:

While you’re like a leaf in the wind, you can also make a difference, and you can also explore parts of yourself that you had no concept of even being there.

In summary, many veterans of extreme sports consider the concept of fighting or conquering the environment profoundly alien to their experience. After all, how can a person conquer a mountain, or defeat a river, or dominate a wave that does not even recognize the existence of the athlete and that will never remain the same? One cannot compete with nature when the human presence in the face of immense natural forces is so insignificant and transitory. Rather participants speak about the extreme sport activity as learning to adapt to, participating with or being attuned to the natural world as in a partnership or ‘dance’. If a conquest exists, it is more of an internal quest for self-knowledge and transcendence. For Arnould and colleagues (1999) this extreme experience tends to produce a reverence for the natural world. Providing the participants take the time to learn about their partner, this harmonious relationship can trigger opportunities for lasting positive change. The power, uncertainty and potential of death outside of the safety nets of civilization, in the face of immense natural forces, facilitates a personal exploration of the participant’s internal landscape and a transcendence to new forms of awareness. Although the sports may be new and rely upon technological innovations, as Bell (2003) appreciated, to ‘dance’ with nature is deeply embedded in human mythology and may be experienced as a spiritual awakening. Ironically, this ancient awareness can occur in new sites using new techniques. The exploration of nature to plumb the depth of human spirit may require contemporary people to enter nature’s wild and untamed places in unprecedented ways.

Implications for outdoor education

The term “outdoor education” has been used in a variety of contexts to describe a vast range of experiences. Seminal work by Donaldson & Donaldson (1958) defined outdoor education as *education in, for, and about the outdoors*. Since then, it has evolved into an educational experience “which impels participants into challenging and demanding situations requiring effort, determination, co-operation and self-reliance” (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997, p. 45). More recently Neill (2002) has expanded this definition to include “an international, experiential education phenomenon which engages people in adventurous activities for enhancement of the well-being of individuals, communities, and the environment ” (Neill, 2002). In short it would seem that an important role of outdoor education is to enhance individual wellbeing through activities that take place in the outdoors.

Researchers exploring the relationship between health and human-nature interactions have found that feeling disconnected from the natural world adversely affects mental health (Frumkin, 2001; Scull, 1999; Wilson, 2001). That is, as human-beings we depend on the natural world, not only for basic needs such as air and water, but also for more holistic wellness. To be fully healthy beings we must establish an intimate relationship to the natural world (Glendinning, 1994).

Some expert extreme athletes suggest in interviews that they do not consider this relationship to be an attempt to conquer the natural world, playing on the natural world or using it only as a resource. Instead, like advocates of holistic, ecological awareness, our subjects describe a relationship of nature-as-partner, nature-as-family, nature-as-self or nature-as-unity. In a sense, they have no “relationship” with nature because there is no separation. From this position of recognizing their embeddedness in nature, 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 recognize that we are part of that glory (Watts, 1970).

The synergy and power of the dance relationship develops into an awareness of a partnership of between equally valued participants, even if the relationship is clearly asymmetrical. Partners may not always be *friendly* but the possibility of treating one’s dance partner as non-valued object or inert presence dissolves. The relationship is no longer one where the other is objectified and valued only for what it can provide. As Mathews (2008) observed the natural world and other-than-human life forms can be seen from a moral and synergistic point of view, even if sometimes the relationship can be confusing, it will never be indifferent.

What I will never be, however, is indifferent. I will never see them merely as an externalised object, either to be treated inhumanely, as the immoral person treats others, or to be treated with in-principle deference, as the person acting merely from probity or moral principle treats them (Mathews, 2008, p. 50).

In this state of interdependence and awareness a particular aspect of the natural world has subjectivity and innate value (Schultz, 2002). The extreme sports experience re-can establish a nature-humanity partnership, where the environmental *other* becomes emotionally connected and deemed to be worthy of care (Schultz, 2002). Reciprocally, the natural world can also become a facilitator of a deep sense of wellbeing and even extraordinary states of awareness and consciousness. Schultz (2002) argued that such experiences of connectedness are characterised by feelings of intimacy. In this way fear, and a resulting desire for domination and control, may be replaced by respect and harmony. The perceptions of the human partner, in many of our accounts of the extreme sport ‘dance,’ have moved from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric perspective, where humanity is recognized as part of the natural world (Kleffel, 1996; Oelschlaeger, 1992).

The findings of this study indicate that by *experientially* realising that we are part of nature, as perhaps a leopard or bird is part of nature, we may re-establish a more intimate link with the natural world and open ourselves to lasting positive life enhancements. To be in nature in such a way that these life altering experiences are *discovered* seems to rely on an acceptance that the natural world is more powerful than humanity; extreme sports may provide a particular potent catalyst for participants to recognize the power of nature and their own immersion in it. In this way, the heightened experience of extreme sports may help participants to decrease their need to control, conquer or battle against the natural world. The natural world becomes more than playing field or resource. In the wave or on the side of the mountain or in the midst of rapids, the natural world and humanity may be experienced as one.

Outdoor education has a role to play in fostering this experience. Our study has shown that rather than cultivating an atmosphere of fearful disconnect and reckless conquest in the natural world, we can work with extreme athletes to foster an intimate relationship by enhancing opportunities for students to dance with the natural world.

Institutions involved in outdoor leadership training could nurture this relationship by reframing delivery so that inclusiveness and intimacy within nature is enhanced, where nature becomes a partner. To do this, we need to reconsider some of our current metaphors for the natural world and how we present the outdoor experience, in both extreme outdoor sports and more traditional activities. Instead of travelling on the river or mountain, these extreme athletes suggest that we need to consider how we travel *with* the river or mountain. Participants have to experience the connection, not just come to an awareness through theoretical perception. In this way, outdoor education will become the medium for reconnecting with the natural world and play a major role in the development of global environmental care. Ironically, extreme sports, which may first attract people because they search for confirmation of their own potency, might instead to a dawning recognition of our own dependency upon and place within the natural world.

Conclusion

Extreme sports unfortunately have earned a reputation for being all about adrenalin and the desire to pit oneself against nature. However, this paper has shown that this external criticism does not align with the experiences of extreme sports participants who speak about the natural world as a partner and the relationship as more of a 'dance.' The athletes described their experiences of being in harmony with nature and suggested that the natural world provides a context for self-learning. These experiences are reflected in modern eco-centric research and writings.

Extreme sports seem to enable transformational experience by facilitating a deep connection with an aspect of ourselves that is brought to light only by being truly in the natural world and subject to outside forces. Outdoor educators can integrate our findings into the fabric of their program construction, finding ways to reach an audience in extreme sports as well as potential resources for our programs. The salient message for those responsible for program design is to encourage a reciprocal relationship with nature by focusing on intimacy as opposed to risk. Clearly, there is a need to re-evaluate existing extreme sport research in a way which strengthens our understanding of connection to nature. This paper suggests that we may learn much by paying attention to extreme athletes' own metaphor of a dance that can be choreographed, embedded and intertwined into the adventure education paradigm.

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