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Understanding Tourist Encounters with Nature: A Thematic Framework

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Abstract

This paper presents a thematic framework that simplifies and explains the complexity of tourist encounters with nature. The research combines qualitative data, derived from questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, field journals and personal observations, of wildlife encounters in Spain and Mexico and encounters with tropical forest in Australia. The data reveal that embodied tourists encounter nature in a multi-sensory manner, although they privilege visual perceptions of the natural world. There are clear differences in the emotional significance of encounters, with visitors negotiating individual yet diverse relations with their surrounding environment, mediated by *in situ* social interactions. Wildlife tourists often perform ritualised roles, directed by tour guides, causing some to question the collective performances of prescribed mobilities. Rainforest tourists, by contrast, are more unbounded in their performances. It is suggested that visitors on guided tours should be given time to experience the wonders of the environment at their own pace, facilitating the achievement of ‘higher order’ needs. The theoretical framework presented in the paper facilitates an exploration of the diversity of connections between people and nature and the myriad ways in which such relationships are formed, interpreted and afforded relevance. The framework is not definitive, but context-specific, serving to inform future understanding.

Key words: wildlife, rainforest, embodiment, performativity, mobilities, Australia, Spain, Mexico

Introduction

Nature-based tourism is a prominent part of the modern tourism experience, facilitating economic and social interaction, as well as organising and legitimating relationships between humanity and nature (Gale and Hill 2009). However, whilst encounter is at the heart of the tourism experience, a recent review highlights the relative paucity of research into the interactions between humans and non-human environments, as compared to the focus on social encounters (Gibson 2010). It is pertinent, therefore, to examine how increasing numbers of nature-based tourists actually encounter nature. Such a study is of relevance to the individual tourist, as well as to tourism managers and policy makers, grappling with issues of conservation and sustainability.

Previous research indicates that tourists primarily consume nature visually (Urry 1990). But as embodied subjects, they move beyond visual consumption to experience nature reflexively through the senses of hearing, touch, smell and taste (Crouch and Desforges 2003; Dann and Jacobsen 2003; Gibson 2010). As Crouch *et al.* (2001: 260-261) note: 'The places that tourists use are walked over, discovered with both feet, leaned against, reached, rested on, enjoyed and endured'. The tourist may also be viewed as an agent, performing tourism through bodily involvement in activities such as walking, viewing and photographing (Edensor 2000a; Tucker 2007; Molz 2010; Larsen and Urry 2011). The human-non-human encounter is necessarily subjective, with the tourist making sense individually of his/her environment as the encounter proceeds (Wylie 2005). Tourist encounters may also occur inter-subjectively, amongst individuals (previously known or unknown), resulting in a multiplicity of sometimes contradictory encounters with the same environment at different times.

Much of Western society today lives in relative isolation from what is often termed the 'natural' world and from wild animals (Adams 2010; but see Macnaghten and Urry, 1998, concerning 'contested natures'). Adopting this view, nature-based tourism might play a role in reconnecting people with nature, but it is important to question exactly what is implied by this. According to Kellert and Wilson (1993), there are a number of ways in which humans relate to the natural world, ranging from purely utilitarian exploitation to deep satisfaction derived from direct experience with nature. Individual tourists have different value orientations, categorised as naturalistic,

ecological, aesthetic, humanistic, dominionistic and negativistic. In addition, it is true to say that any specific encounter may provoke a variety of affective responses, both positive and negative, which are experienced to different degrees. Emotions generated may range from contentment (possibly aligned with an affinity to nature, or 'biophilia' (Kellert and Wilson 1993)), to distress, caused by excessive emotional or physical challenge (Markwell 2001).

Immersing the body in nature can progress individuals from ego-centred alienation to eco-centred attunement with nature through an experience of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). An individual in a state of 'flow' loses consciousness of the passage of time, becoming absorbed in the moment and in their surroundings. In essence, they escape the momentum of everyday existence and dwell in a calm and focused existence bound in the present. This uniting of emotion and ecology can invoke a feeling of profound happiness and wellbeing, in which individuals perceive intense beauty in their surroundings and experience disorientation in time. There are similarities here with Bennett's (2001) idea of enchantment, whereby individuals become momentarily transfixed with wonder via phenomenological encounters with everyday material objects.

In addition to consideration of affective responses, tourist encounters with nature may also be examined in relation to visitor circulation, immobilisation and the boundaries that act to define tourist movements through space and time. The tourism industry can control or sanction its participants, guiding their movement, regulating their encounters and reinforcing collective norms (Macnaghten and Urry 2000a; Edensor 2007). Depending on the type of tourist experience, movement may be highly controlled, as in safari jeeps, or more fluid, as visitors negotiate their own course on foot, as with hiking in national parks (although even here movement may be regimented by trails and 'no-go' areas). Fixed boundaries serve to formalise the relationship between nature and tourists, reinforcing nature as 'other'. They can, however, be metaphorically transcended and rendered invisible to the tourist if the nature experience is suitably engaging.

Tourism, therefore, provides a socio-cultural setting within which nature is constructed and consumed through particular and varied experiences. Using as its basis an existing research framework that relates only to wildlife watching activities (Curtin 2009), this paper explores the transient encounters of tourists with both the plant and animal components of nature. There is no attempt to examine the long-term

relationships that may be constructed via protracted place engagement, leading to deeper place attachment (Brown and Raymond 2007). Equally, there is not space herein to detail the contested socio-cultural constructions of ‘nature’ as communicated by a variety of producers including academics, tour operators, tour guides and protected area managers. We acknowledge that there is no single or simple definition of nature and human relationality to it (Reis and Shelton 2011). However, we adopt herein a Romantic sublime view of nature as separate from humans, with the body acting as the prime medium enabling or disabling immersion and reconnection with the natural world. We refer to nature as an ecologically grounded representation of organic life that is ‘other-than-human’; an integrated web of diverse ecosystem components, most readily differentiated into plant and animal constituents, and influenced to varying degrees by human agency.

Within this context, the chief aim of the paper is to construct a framework that simplifies and explains the complexity of tourist encounters with plants and animals in nature-based (as opposed to manifestly cultural) settings, advancing understanding from an existing framework that pertained solely to wildlife encounters, whilst nevertheless being receptive to revision following more expansive data collection. Evidencing the diverse character of embodied encounters with key ecosystem components results in a holistic, yet simple and workable, model that can inform management practice at nature-based sites.

Research Methods

In order to investigate tourist encounters with nature, three primary data sets are discussed in this paper. Two of the data sets, referring to visitor encounters with birds in Andalusia, Spain and whales and birds in Baja California, Mexico, have previously been used to establish a preliminary thematic framework with respect to wildlife encounters (Curtin 2009) (Figure 1). The use of the third data set, concerning visitor encounters with tropical rainforest in Queensland, Australia, enables the existing framework to be tested and refined in an ecosystem where wildlife encounters are, by comparison, rare. This is due to the evasiveness of high trophic level animals amidst dense rainforest foliage (Knight 2010). It is important to note that the study participants at all sites represented the ‘serious’ end of the nature-based tourism spectrum (Stebbins 2007). Encountering and studying nature was the primary motivation for their travel,

and every day was centred on either wildlife watching or visiting diverse ecosystems (Curtin 2009; Hill and Gough 2009).

[Figure 1 about here]

We employed grounded theory as our over-arching method. Inductive in nature, this method enables salient concepts to surface from data during the analytical process, instead of being deductively derived before research begins (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Grounded theory development typically includes in situ observations and face-to-face questioning of informants by researchers, as adopted in all three case studies here.

In both Andalucia and Baja California, in 2006 and 2007 respectively, small-scale studies were undertaken by joining wildlife tour groups and recording participants' responses to wildlife in field journals and via 11 in-depth interviews. Further interviews were also conducted with nine tourists, sourced from a wildlife tour operators' client database, who regularly took dedicated wildlife holidays. The 20 interviewees, all from the UK and balanced by gender, were predominantly in their 50s and 60s, travelling alone or with their partner. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were then analysed to produce broad thematic clusters of meaning, which were used to create a preliminary research framework (Curtin 2009). Although there is not scope within this paper to examine any influence of socio-demographics on the tourist encounters, summary statistics are included to highlight the identity of the sample respondents and to afford the results context.

Field research in the Daintree rainforest, Queensland, Australia, had already produced relevant qualitative data as part of a larger questionnaire-based study of 265 English-speaking visitors, carried out in July/August 2004 and July 2005. This study had been undertaken at a private site incorporating an unsurfaced 1.75km circular forest ropewalk. The walk was subject to minimal anthropogenic intervention, thereby offering a largely uncontrived encounter with the forest ecosystem (Figure 2). This contrasts with numerous interpretive boardwalks that can be found in the local area and particularly with the Daintree Discovery Centre, located in close proximity to the site. The Discovery Centre offers a more highly managed experience to visitors, including all-access ground and mid-canopy walkways that are rigidly partitioned from the forest,

selectively accessible tree-top towers, written and audio interpretation and a comprehensive visitor centre (McNamara and Prideaux 2010).

[Figure 2 about here]

The visitor sample for this study was dominated by tourists from overseas, visiting the rainforest alone or in pairs/small groups. The majority were female and under 30 years of age. They were largely accommodated on-site and were usually staying between 1 and 4 days. Open-ended responses from the questionnaires were analysed for this project by focusing on the systematic identification and categorisation of meaningful themes derived from words and phrases commonly used by respondents to address the questions. It must be noted, however, that such grounded theory construction is idiosyncratic and subjective. The process of categorising written expression derives in part from the representation of issues as identified by the researchers (Coffey and Atkinson 1996) and, even without this layer of subjective filtering, the authenticity of the written word in capturing affective feelings must be viewed with caution. Both researcher positionality, and apprehension of affect and embodiment through written and verbal means, leaves the results situated in particular methods and social constructions of knowledge. Visitor observation could not be adopted in the rainforest due to the ecosystem precluding viewing from afar. Equally, walking with visitors and undertaking participant observation would erase their intentions of experiencing the forest alone or in small groups. The results must therefore be interpreted within these limitations.

Nevertheless, the preliminary research framework, developed by Curtin (2009), was tested and extended to include 'second-order' themes (Denzin 1997). The revised framework, illustrated in Figure 3, has as its conceptual foundation the embodied encounter of tourists with plants and animals in nature-based settings. The body provides a point of contact between people and environment, allowing them to grasp the world multi-sensually; to encounter space affectively and multi-dimensionally; and to negotiate personal relations with surrounding space, sometimes connecting with others, potentially altering their interactions with it over time (Crouch 2000). Four key emergent themes from the coding process, and their supporting empirical evidence, are illustrated below to guide discussion of tourist responses. Verbatim quotes are used extensively to illustrate the responses, as are journal extracts pertaining to the wildlife

encounters. Note that the quotes regarding wildlife experiences do not relate solely to the in-situ experiences of the respondents.

[Figure 3 about here]

Embodied Encounters with Nature

1. Sensory interaction

Both the wildlife and rainforest tourists tended to express their encounters in terms of a sensuous embodied experience that was overwhelmingly visual (Figure 3). With reference to the Daintree, visitors articulated an ecological gaze (agreeing with McNamara and Prideaux 2011), noting ecosystem characteristics such as the height and density of trees, stratified canopy layers and diversity of plants:

‘Seeing the rainforest trees: how high they grow, different layers, and what affects (sic) changes can have on them’ (Daintree, 200)

‘Packed full of trees, bushes, vines, palms, etc: all in different shape and size’ (Daintree, 20)

Other senses were mentioned as subsidiary referents:

‘The walk through the rainforest allowed me to see different trees/plants and hear lots of birds and animals’ (Daintree, 68)

‘Seeing a completely different habitat, with its associated smells, sounds and atmosphere’ (Daintree, 94)

‘Saw a lot of wildlife ... I enjoyed listening which was a surprise to me’ (Daintree, 122)

The visitors perceived the rainforest multi-sensually and they tended to experience and articulate it, perhaps as a consequence, multi-dimensionally (following Crouch 2000).

Sight was also by no means the only sense involved in the wildlife encounter:

‘I have seen and heard things in the natural world that I didn’t know even existed. It was as if my senses were coming alive’ (Baja, 8)

‘When you get close to something [an animal] there are so many other senses that come into play’ (client database, 6)

Respondents made reference to the smells of whale blow and bird colonies, and these were experienced in a soundscape of birdsong, ocean waves and animal calls:

‘Isn’t it wonderful when [whales] are so close you can hear them breathe and smell their fishy breath?’ (Baja, 9)

‘I remember visiting a gannet colony and the smell of their droppings ... it felt really wild and ‘edge of the world’’ (Baja, 11)

Encounters with nature were thus recalled in a multi-sensory manner (Edensor 2000b; Macnaghten and Urry 2000b), with wildlife tourists tending to refer more frequently than rainforest tourists to olfactory sensations as a means of processing their experience. The intimacy of smelling animals, linked possibly to the close proximity needed to achieve this in an often spontaneous and transient moment, is more memorable it seems than the all-pervading smell of damp vegetation in a rainforest. However, the multi-sensory experiences of both types of tourists do lead to strong emotional responses to their nature encounters, and these will now be examined.

2. Affective/emotional response

Empirical evidence for tourists’ affective responses is presented with respect to five prevailing singularities and dualities: wonder and awe, empathy/anthropomorphism, immersion versus alienation, security versus vulnerability and calm versus excited (Figure 3).

a) Wonder and awe.

These represent aroused states of cognition whereby tourists marvel at the magnificence of their surroundings. There are several facets to wonderment, one being the emotional response to the beauty of a spectacle. With reference to the rainforest visitors, there were numerous references made to beauty, including:

‘It is more beautiful than I could imagine’ (Daintree, 218)

‘It is beautiful, peaceful, powerful - and there!’ (Daintree, 5)

The wildlife respondents also noted the inherent beauty of animals in nature:

‘It’s like those Frigate Birds, they were so graceful and such beautiful movements ...’

(Baja, 6)

‘I loved watching the hundreds of seabirds which would follow the boat in the Antarctic ... it was like a ballet. So beautiful’ (Baja, 7)

There were also expressions of wonder from both rainforest and wildlife tourists concerning nature’s design and in relation to experiencing immanent connections with nature:

‘The nature was amazing ... it seemed to be an intact and functioning ecosystem’

(Daintree, 150)

‘Just watching a trail of ants building towers is interesting ... they evoke a childish sense of wonderment’ (Baja, 11)

‘We are part of it and it’s wonderful to see that these things exist and the wonder of it all stays with you’ (Baja, 11)

Some respondents experienced moments of ‘flow’ or absorption (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; see also Bennett 2001) that were truly inspirational and awe-inspiring. It is clear that seeing wildlife in its natural setting has the power to uplift the human spirit:

‘Seeing a beautiful bird is ... a moment of insight, a moment of revelation and inspiration, whatever and its gone sometimes in a flash, like a moment of music which makes you shudder and then it’s over’ (client database, 7)

‘The best spiritual moments are the ones you are least expecting when you think you are being quite calm and serene and you have a moment of revelation. Seeing wildlife is like that’ (client database, 7)

Equally, some visitors to the rainforest expressed spiritual fulfilment:

‘The feeling of nourishment I get from being in untamed nature especially when it’s dense and prolific like these rainforests’ (Daintree, 66)

A state of ‘flow’, however, is rarely achieved through wildlife watching in rainforest since it is impossible to orchestrate wildlife in this ecosystem to achieve sustained tourism-wildlife encounters.

Given the immense biodiversity exhibited in nature, it is perhaps not surprising that a sense of wonder and awe is expressed by so many respondents. It must also be remembered that words can fail when talking about nature experiences. Such experiences can be knowable but difficult to articulate in words, much less to quantify in a scientific manner (Bulbeck 2005).

b) Empathy/anthropomorphism.

Animals have the capacity to represent the characters and dispositions of human societies (Pyle 2003). There is a tendency, therefore, for people to feel empathy towards them, trying to understand animals in terms of human interpretations of their world and anthropomorphising them by relating their behaviours to those of humans. Respondents in all the samples anthropomorphised nature, noting, for example, the ‘intelligence’ and ‘clever inter-play’ amongst whales and dolphins, and the need to respect and value the rainforest ecosystem as it is ‘the heart of our world’. This response derives largely from what Clements (1916) describes as an organismic view of nature:

‘It’s like one living organism’ (Daintree, 163)

‘Experiences like this make you stop and think about nature and our part in it. Where do we belong?’ (Baja, 7)

Wildlife and rainforest visitors often perceived nature as one complexly functioning organism, whose health could be threatened, but whose persistence could also be assured, by human action. This connotes a sense of separation of the human species from remaining ecosystem components, which can be deployed eco-centrally in the form of biome conservation:

‘We have to take care of it! It is too majestic to go to waste!’ (Daintree, 125)

‘We have been given this and it is up to us what we do with it, whether we preserve it or respect it, work with it and live with it in harmony’ (Andalucia, 4)

Alongside the pervasive danger of (over-)exploitation, are possibilities from nature encounters to change attitudes and extend relations of care (Gibson 2010). Such

Western-driven conservation ecology might be said, however, to champion the ideology of human mastery over nature, empowering the human species to determine the condition of nature and life for animals (Doyle and McEachern 1998).

c) *Immersion versus alienation.*

Tourists encountering nature expressed varying degrees of attachment to it. In the rainforest, these ranged from the extreme of multi-sensory immersion, those who felt truly amidst nature as if they were dislocated from the modern world, to detached alienation, when the body was perceived as out-of-place:

‘Its (sic) great to feel so lost in nature, away from man-made things and technology’
(Daintree, 19)

‘We were a true visitor in their environment’ (Daintree, 25)

The rainforest visitors often used spatial terms associated with being in the ‘midst’ of nature or feeling ‘connected’ to it:

‘Being at one with nature and being able to enjoy myself’ (Daintree, 105)

They also made explicit contrasts with the urban, technologised world, as is common with many leisure walkers throughout history (Solnit 2001). In addition to the quote above, respondents noted the forest as ‘totally opposite to the built environment (urban jungle)’ (Daintree, 20), expressing ‘no sound of humanity – no sound of vehicles’ (Daintree, 78) and ‘away from human civilisation’ (Daintree, 97).

Visitors largely experienced a sensual and immersive encounter with an ecosystem that was often novel to them. This is most likely explained by the characteristics of the site. The narrow, unsurfaced path with tree trunks and boughs to climb over or pass under provides an immediate and ‘unstaged’ encounter with nature (Cohen 1979) (Figure 2). An experience on foot through a largely unmanaged ecosystem is certainly more likely to deliver a sense of immersion than a wildlife-watching trip that relies on motorised transport, scientific tracking equipment, cameras and binoculars. Similarly, watching wildlife through binoculars from afar, as with many controlled wildlife-watching experiences (Figure 4), is more analogous to being a passive observer or spectator:

‘You are of their world but not in it’ (client database, 7)

‘... there is a profound sense of voyeurism’ (SC field diary)

[Figure 4 about here]

Immersion in and connection with wildlife is more often achieved when there is ‘eye to eye’ contact or ‘at-one-ment’ liaisons (Ackerman 2003). As two Baja respondents recalled from previous wildlife encounters:

‘... when a matriarch elephant stopped in her tracks to look at me, you just feel a connection’ (Baja, 9)

‘it is just much more intimate We are sharing their space and we are looking at each other and wondering’ (Baja, 6)

The rainforest offers an immersive space of encounter as the trees are close, dense and seemingly limitless (Wylie 2005), allowing only rare distant views. By contrast, with wildlife viewing, there is an escape from proximate space as a wildlife ‘spectacle’ is viewed most often in the near distance. Horizons are opened out and the environment becomes a stage upon which often charismatic animals perform their lives in front of tourists. For the mass market, such species tend to be large, aesthetically appealing, predictable, considered intelligent and possessing a history of association with humans (Curtin 2006). The lack of visible charismatic animals in the Daintree rainforest transformed the habitat from the stage on which the wildlife performed to the main act. Some visitors connected with and appreciated the flora in such a manner, but some found the lack of fauna disappointing (see also Chan and Baum 2007):

‘I was expecting to see lots of wildlife, snakes and birds, but it was all sounds I heard’ (Daintree, 101)

d) Security versus vulnerability.

Potential dangers and discomforts were identified by some respondents in the Daintree as impacting upon, or even defining, their encounter with nature. At this largely unmanaged site, there were visitors who felt uncomfortable being so close to nature and for whom the experience was somewhat spoiled by elements of this proximity. Their

vulnerabilities related particularly to the perceived presence of wild pigs, the spines of the lawyer vine, and the slippery surface of the path:

‘I was frightened by the pigs! I was too stressed to see anything else after the pigs!’
(Daintree, 110)

‘Some plants had thorns and are vicious’ (Daintree, 49)

‘Because of all the mud it was very slippery and actually dangerous’ (Daintree, 159)

Such visitors became acutely aware of the physicality of their encounter with nature and the resultant threats to the integrity of their bodies (Markwell 2001; Chan and Baum 2007). Indeed, physical danger became the over-riding facet of self-awareness for some who clearly felt intimidated by the wildlife and did not want to encounter ‘risky’ species (as in the negativist value orientation identified by Kellert and Wilson 1993). In comparison with the wildlife tourists, who explicitly sought out close encounters with species, some visitors to the rainforest clearly felt intimidated by the wildlife and did not want to encounter many of its component species.

There were many visitors to the rainforest, however, who expressed feelings of security, using words such as ‘beautiful’, ‘calm’ and ‘quiet’, implying a secure and enjoyable encounter. As one respondent commented, the encounter:

‘... reinforced my love of places untouched by man’ (Daintree, 26)

This pleasure-anxiety binary has been discovered in other studies of nature encounters, particularly with reference to visitor experiences of hiking trails (Wylie 2005; Dorwart *et al.* 2010). It highlights the individualistic responses that can arise from encountering similar biophysical environments.

With respect to the wildlife tourists, the same polarity was evident. Security was often expressed in relation to viewing wildlife in ‘home’ environments:

‘It’s important that [wildlife] is around you. To know that it is there’ (client database, 2)

The wildlife tourists rarely expressed fear in encountering animals, possibly because they were motivated primarily by seeing a diverse array of fauna. They tended not to get very close to individual animals, unless by accident, and then the encounter

offered an unexpected, memorable thrill - a story to narrate that did not convey vulnerability:

‘When you go down the track you’ve got ... your sea lion which comes to say hello, or your iguana just laying there sunning itself and you have to step around it’ (Andalucia, 1)

Vulnerability was only expressed in relation to uncommon encounters with species that were perceived as threatening:

‘As I entered the water, I feel unexpectedly nervous. Sea lions are large and have teeth. It is with caution that I approach the area where they are’ (SC field diary)

This agrees with previous research on tourists swimming with dolphins (Curtin 2006), where the size, speed, agility and power of the animals in close proximity scared some tourists.

e) Calm versus excited.

There was a noticeable distinction between the articulation of encounters with rainforest and wildlife in terms of levels of excitement. When referring to wildlife encounters, respondents tended to capture an essence of thrill and excitement:

‘... there are moments when you just hit a vein of birding where you think - wow - you know it is something which explodes into your memory. It’s exciting, it’s amazing’ (Andalucia, 3)

‘I find it exciting, it’s exciting, it’s thrilling. I find it exhilarating. I can’t say any more than that. I can’t find the words’ (Baja, 6)

By contrast, in the rainforest many visitors referred to a peaceful/quiet or relaxing/tranquil encounter (see also Chaun and Baum 2007):

‘Well it was peaceful, nice, calm’ (Daintree, 145)

‘beautiful place ... interesting and relaxing’ (Daintree, 86)

Notably, when excitement was mentioned by rainforest respondents, it was related to encountering wildlife; not exotic species, but opportunistic feral species such as wild pigs:

‘Excitement to see large pigs close up’ (Daintree, 18)

‘Saw some wild pigs which was very exciting’ (Daintree, 81)

A lack of encounter with other species, coupled with the close proximity to and large numbers of these animals, seemed to offer the visitors a sense of thrill, even though pigs might be labelled as a non-charismatic and unappealing species.

3. Subjective and inter-subjective performativity

As the previous two sections have highlighted, tourists negotiate individual yet diverse relations with diverse ecosystem components. Example responses from the rainforest tourists highlight very different experiences in essentially the same ecosystem, ranging from indifferent to captivated:

‘Some of the trees were smaller than I thought they would be and there wasn’t much wildlife’ (Daintree, 33)

‘I saw many plants never seen before, spotted birds, it was an ultimate beauty’
(Daintree, 49)

Additionally, the affective appeal of a particular ecosystem has as much to do with the social interactions that occur there as with the overall allure of its environment (Edensor 2000b). The diversity of social experiences in the rainforest ranged from annoyance at people (either known or unknown) who distracted visitors from their preferred means of encounter, to enjoyment of a shared experience (Dorwart *et al.* 2010). Visitors rated highly the sharing of their encounter with loved ones if their styles of engagement were congruent. Thus, the social norms of each visitor may have influenced how they perceived others during their walk and how they responded during those encounters (Heywood and Murdock 2002).

A sense of isolation is perhaps more readily achieved in the rainforest than whilst wildlife-watching. Wildlife-watching is often undertaken in a group, either

formally or informally, and too many visitors congregating to watch wildlife can reduce the satisfaction of the experience:

‘We went whale watching in Kaikoura, which for most people is very exciting, but for me it didn’t come close ... a lot of it was that we were on a much bigger boat ... it is better on a much smaller scale’ (client data base, 6)

Differences in response to similar situations were also shown by wildlife tourists. For some, intimacy was an important part of memorable wildlife encounters, whilst others worried that close proximity might disturb nature’s equilibrium. These two quotes may be contrasted:

‘One of the most memorable things was the South American Snipe which you can get very close to’ (client database, 1)

‘We are the privileged spectators and we should never interfere. We should never try and coax [whales] to come close to us or we should try not to get so close just so that we could get a good picture’ (Baja, 8)

The wildlife tourists were aware of the potential disturbance to the wildlife spectacle caused by their bodies, and they were anxious to minimise this through quietness and stillness. There was desire to control breathing and movement and to merge bodies into nature; to be invisible and unthreatening to prolong the encounter (which Thrift (2000) describes as kinaesthesia). This was also evident amongst visitors to the rainforest. Many visitors reported, post-encounter, that they were aware of the need to be quiet to view wildlife and to take more time to enjoy sights and sounds.

4. Spatio-temporal mobilities

The final theme emerging from the research coding concerned the spatial and temporal dimensions of tourist encounters with nature (Figure 3). The Daintree rainforest walk presents an often muddy path to visitors. This style of walk can distract visitors from nature as they focus on their footing, but it can also offer them a more genuine rainforest experience. Both of these aspects were expressed by visitors:

‘There was so much mud, the track was so slippery, instead of taking in the forest I had to look down all the time to avoid falling’ (Daintree, 162)

‘It felt like we were walking in the rainforest rather than a tourist track that is usually distanced from the trees’ (Daintree, 2)

Some visitors wanted to be sure of the ground beneath their feet and to experience little adventure associated with movement. They wished to focus uninhibited on the surrounding ecosystem. Others seemed to embrace the challenge posed by walking in a competent fashion over a slippery and uneven surface, proximate to plant and animal life. The challenging character of the path offered them the opportunity to encounter the rainforest as a raw physical experience. These visitors seemed content to adopt a mode of movement that was mindful of physical interruptions.

The rope demarcating the walk was the only physical intervention between the body of the visitor and nature (excepting boots, clothing and lotions next to the skin). Although quite inconspicuous, it nevertheless acted to separate, to some extent, the tourist from nature on the ‘other’ side of the divide. The rope thereby acted to constrain visitors spatially, defining their course through the forest. It guided them along a circuit in which direction and bearing were rendered meaningless amongst the tangle of vegetation, and in which every step forward paradoxically carried them ‘home’.

Natural interventions also guided the movement of visitors along the walk. The forest growth cycle intervened in visitors’ movement, as treefall from cyclone damage and old age directed them around fallen objects in a circuitous fashion. Thus, flow was punctuated temporally by the need to stop and consider how to surmount obstacles. As Crouch (1999: 12) notes about tourist encounters, ‘the subject bends, turns, lifts and moves in often awkward ways ... in a complexity of multi-sensual surfaces that the embodied subject reaches’. In short, movement is disrupted as the body improvises in accordance with the physical encumbrances that confront it.

By contrast, those visitors who felt intimidated by the rainforest wildlife tended to adopt the coping strategy of ‘flight’ from the forest to avoid (further) encounter (Tuck-Po 2008). These visitors hastened their movement and often turned back on themselves, establishing counter-flows, as they retraced their steps out of the forest. They demonstrated a ‘resistant performance’ in response to an uncomfortable encounter (Macnaghten and Urry 2000a: 2).

With respect to temporal engagement, rainforest visitors moved at their own pace, often commenting upon the desire to pause, look and listen. One visitor expressed a wish to disengage with the track, free from the impetus of circulation, to immobilise the body and connect spiritually with the forest:

‘I would like occasional pockets along the walk offset from the main track to sit, meditate/absorb the feeling/energy’ (Daintree, 23)

Wildlife tourists tend to experience a more regulated encounter with nature as they are mobilised (even choreographed) in groups under the direction of a guide (Macnaghten and Urry 2000a; Edensor 2007). The guide dictates the speed and direction of movement of visitors, or their vehicles, in order to try and secure a satisfying wildlife encounter (Figure 5). Individual freedom of movement is thus constrained by the constructs of the chosen tour. Movement in nature is punctuated, rendered a-rhythmical, by time spent in minibuses or boats, and in hides waiting to witness wildlife. It is usually a ‘trade off’ between freedom of movement and seeing wildlife:

‘You recognise birds at the speed of the most expert watchers but you walk at the speed of the slowest person. Like today, we didn’t hardly walk at all (sic)’ (Andalucia, 2)

‘We are finally allowed to get out of our vehicle and we scour the sandy paths looking for signs of lynx’ (SC travel diary)

These quotes also suggest that temporal mobilities are somewhat defined by the competence of the tourists contextualised within the visited ecosystems. Good skills of wildlife spotting and identification can enhance group mobility, whilst poor physical and cognitive abilities can result in decreased mobility around the spaces of wildlife encounter.

[Figure 5 about here]

Being in a group for a long period of time (i.e. wildlife tours of over a week) can become stifling and often tourists will develop mechanisms to find the solitude that allows contemplation and immersion:

‘I need to wander off on my own from time to time’ (Andalucia, 5)

‘I wanted to hold back from the group so that I could enjoy the Lemurs for a little longer - they were already on to the next thing’ (client database, 8)

In essence, these visitors wish to break free from a regulatory codification of performance to seek a more personally appropriate encounter (Edensor 2000a).

With both the rainforest and wildlife encounters, many visitors expressed a slowing or stopping of time. Modern fast clock time dissipates and is replaced by the stillness of ‘real’ time, experienced in and through nature (Thrift 2000):

‘The time out there helped me to slow down and connect and appreciate the forest experience’ (Daintree, 143)

‘I think time stops. You are so absorbed in what you are doing’ (client database, 4)

In this reprieve from everyday existence dwells a calm and focussed encounter, bound in the present:

‘I think that that is one of the advantages of bird-watching. You are concentrating on what you are doing ... you can’t actually think about other things if you are trying to identify them’ (client database, 1)

‘One can do nothing and relax to the sounds and smells of nature’ (Daintree, 53)

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to assist the development of our understanding of the multi-faceted ways tourists encounter nature, expanding and re-focusing an initial thematic framework. The original framework was based on research conducted solely with wildlife tourists, and therefore lacked external validity (Curtin, 2009). Re-conceptualisation has been carried out through a reconsideration of the findings, alongside data derived from a third project, conducted in a rainforest ecosystem. The revised framework (Figure 3) synthesizes the commonalities and complexities of tourist encounters with diverse ecosystem components in nature-based settings. The key findings, and their relevance to tourism managers, are now summarised.

It is acknowledged that the data presented here are limited to sites that have at least some elements of external control and to visitors whose primary motivation for travel is to encounter the plant and/or wildlife components of nature. The resulting framework is attributable only to these circumstances. Further research is necessary to

broaden the study sites and the types of research participants, and to capture the plurality of ensuing tourist experiences (Uriely 2005). As such, the framework is not definitive, but offers a context-specific model that is intended to inform future studies.

Whilst the tourist encounters with nature were experientially, temporally and geographically different, what is noteworthy is there is some similarity in findings, despite the range of settings and types of data collection employed. This suggests that diverse human-nature experiences have the potential to evoke broadly similar responses in tourists, mediated by the way in which the body engages with its surrounding biophysical environment. The conceptual foundation of embodiment might thereby help to inform the provision of tourist experiences that engender a positive appreciation of the natural world.

With respect to the Daintree rainforest encounter, the influence of the tourism industry was minimised by the privately owned site being subject to limited material intervention. Visitors consequently encountered the untamed and unpredictable character of the ecosystem. The experiences of the wildlife viewers in Andalucia and Baja California, by contrast, were more highly mediated by tour operators, offering more contrived yet prolonged encounters with wildlife. The operators more overtly organised and structured the experience of the visitors in/with nature, serving to reinforce an outsider's tourist gaze (Urry 1990). Nevertheless, even though a species may have been the focal point, the embodied experience of being in nature made it difficult to separate wildlife experiences from nature experiences. Equally, experiencing nature minus wildlife (particularly charismatic species) could lead to a disappointing encounter for some tourists.

The embodied tourists encountered nature corporeally (Crouch *et al.* 2001; Crouch and Desforges 2003). Research in the Australian rainforest indicated that many visitors returned from their encounter with a multi-sensory, multi-dimensional appreciation of the forest and its structure and sounds. The wildlife encounters also appealed to many senses and sometimes moved individuals into a state of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), where thought and action were concentrated on watching, photographing and enjoying animals as tourists lost themselves in nature. It is important to note, however, that the visual still dominated the multi-sensory encounter. Nature-based marketers and managers need to be mindful of this privileging of the visual when promoting and maintaining their destinations. Additionally, visitors to the rainforest often articulated their encounter in a spiritual sense, describing a close connection with

nature. Some seemed to attain a peak state of ‘flow’, gaining a moment of absorbed enlightenment. This was facilitated by the visitors encountering the rainforest in a self-paced manner, many completing the walk alone or with just one companion.

The suite of affective responses of tourists to nature extended from awe-inspiring to unsettling and frightening. There were clear differences in the emotional significance of the encounters, with the visitors negotiating individual yet diverse relations with nature (Uriely 2005). Whilst viewing wildlife at the top of the food chain might offer intense excitement (Bulbeck 2005), there are limited viewing opportunities for such species in the rainforest. The structure of the ecosystem, with its high density of trees and thick cover of foliage at multiple heights, tends to shield elusive wildlife from the gaze of tourists. But whilst the ecosystem largely defies management, the expectations of visitors need not. Tourists to rainforest sites need to be made aware that wildlife viewing will be difficult and requires protracted periods *in situ* to unite the rhythms of the visitor with those of nature (Edensor 2010). Successful nature-based tourism is ‘slow tourism’ (Matos 2004), allowing a more protracted encounter with place and its unpredictable wildlife. This research also indicates that there is a sense of fulfilment in viewing those species that either comprise the lower levels of food chains and/or are non-charismatic. There is potential for pre-visit information to condition visitors to expect and subsequently enjoy contact with plants, ‘lesser’ animals (such as insects, amphibians and reptiles), or even wider sensory contact with wildlife such as bird-song.

The wildlife tourists often acted out ritualised roles of observation, identification and photography, directed over space and time by tour guides in a purposive manner to often pre-determined viewing areas. This caused some to question the somewhat disciplined collective performances of prescribed mobilities. Such findings highlight how a focus on performativity can open avenues for examining power relations in tourism studies, particularly locally configured tourist resistances to rationalization in natural area destinations (Jamal *et al.* 2003; Tucker 2007). They resonate with Gibson’s (2010: 525) call to more precisely locate ‘the agents, moments and techniques’ in the exercise of power during tourism encounters. By contrast, the rainforest tourists were less prescribed in their movements over space and time. They were more unbounded in their performances and made much less comment about prescriptions on their movement as a consequence. It is advisable, therefore, to provide visitors on guided tours time to experience the wonders of the biophysical environment

at their own pace, thereby enhancing satisfaction and facilitating the achievement of 'higher order' needs (Maslow 1968; Kellert and Wilson 1993).

To conclude, a rich vein of research in contemporary tourism study concerns the potential of tourist encounters with nature to transform the individuals taking part in the activity. The transformative potential has been studied most intensely with respect to restorative health benefits, reducing stress and mental fatigue (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989), and to altering visitors' attitudes to environmentally sustainable practices (Ballantyne *et al.* 2009). The research presented here has highlighted that encountering both the plant and animal components of ecosystems is sensually and emotionally absorbing, potentially spiritually uplifting, and allows time out from daily routines to enable contemplation and reflection. Both the rainforest and wildlife tourists articulated a sense of stepping outside of everyday concerns and mundane social materialities, and into a different world in which they found beauty and fulfilment, thus creating memorable nature experiences. Tourists' future expectations and behaviours are often based on memories of prior experiences so these results could aid tourism managers in providing conditions conducive to a healthy and satisfying experience and to intrinsic behavioural change, the latter contributing to the longevity of the nature-based tourism industry (Gibson 2010). It is hoped, therefore, that this study might contribute to enhanced marketing and management strategies in nature tourism, as well as highlighting a valid framework for future research, by providing fresh tools and impetus to explore the diversity of connections between people and nature and the myriad ways in which these relationships are formed, interpreted and afforded relevance.

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Figure 1. An existing thematic framework that describes the emotional and experiential benefits of watching wildlife. *Source:* Curtin, 2009.

Figure 2. A close encounter with nature: a visitor on the forest ropewalk in the Daintree.

Figure 3. A new thematic framework articulating the complexity of tourist encounters with plants and animals in nature-based settings.

Figure 4. Passive observers: bird watching in Baja California.

Figure 5. Regulated encounters: watching Ibis in Andalucia.