'A Walk Among the Gum Trees': Bushwalking, Place and Self-Narrative

Presenter: Rebecca Banham
Affiliation/s: University of Tasmania

> I've always walked. Ever since [I was a kid] … So it's something I've
>
> always done, and enjoyed. So I just… I don't know. Maybe it's just in the,
>
> in the psyche. (James)

Amidst the "alienation and insecurity of the modern, mobile world" (Barry 1999: 98), bushwalking – that Australian take on walking in nature – performs an important function in the establishment of self-identity. There is an understanding that self-identity has important links to sense of place and the environment, and Giddens (1991) suggests that the stability of 'self-narrative' is sought in light of a contemporary landscape of insecurity, and changed relationships between humans and the 'natural' world. How, then, might a situated activity such as bushwalking function as a means of establishing self-narrative? Drawing on the experiences of a group of Tasmanian bushwalkers, this paper argues that bushwalking has significant implications for the sense of belonging, continuity, and security by informing a stable self-narrative.

In analysing the effect of the shift in conditions from the pre-modern to the contemporary world, Giddens (1991) details the characteristics of 'self-narrative'. This establishment of the self is a reflexive process, through which the individual forms their identity through a sense of trajectory, progressing from the past into the future. This story of the self is the 'main event' for the individual, taking precedence in perception over outside events (which are conceptualised and integrated as part of the 'story'). The establishment of this internal biography is predicated upon constancy, and the demarcation of personal time; it is a reflexively embodied experience that takes place through 'passages', or life stages, through which the individual balances potential opportunities and risks. Self-narrative is primarily that, a narrative - the establishment

of which informs the individual's sense of self and behaviour (Giddens 1991). Bushwalking can function as a performative element of self-identity, by fulfilling these characteristics that constitute the establishment of a stable self-narrative.

Identity, place and bushwalking

Perceptions and experiences of the natural world have an intimate relationship with self-identity. Cheng et al. (2003) suggest that personally meaningful places provide a sense of order in the individual's world; as Egoz (2013: 272) puts it, "landscape [builds] identity … in response to the basic human need to belong". As such, the environment is understood through the lens of self-identity, with a wide range of literature exploring this process (Greider & Garkovich 1994; Cantrill 1998; Clayton & Opotow 2003; Urquhart & Acott 2014). Two overarching elements of the literature are relevant here. Firstly, the process by which 'the environment' is understood is tied to macro-level changes, such as globalisation, shifts in national identities, and increasing mobility and uncertainty (Giddens 1991; Rennie Short 1991; Beck 1992; Egoz 2013). Secondly, this process has to do with the individual's experiences of constancy, stability and belonging (Giddens 1991; Whitmarsh & O'Neill 2010; Egoz 2013; Drescher 2014). This latter point was reflected in participants' discussions about their connections to particular places, childhood experiences, finding a sense of continuity in the cyclical rhythms of nature, and their sense of Tasmania as 'home'. Emotional attachments to place appear to be an important component of environmental experiences.

The term 'bushwalking' - as opposed to 'hiking', 'walking', or 'tramping' - ties the activity to its identity as an 'Australian' act. Bushwalking was pioneered in the early twentieth century by Myles Dunphy, who established a link between bushwalking and conservation, believing wilderness experiences to be "good for the mind, the soul, and the country" (Hutton & Connors 1999: 65). While place connections and behaviours such as bushwalking are not synonymous with environmental concern, there appears to be a correlation between them (Svarstad 2010).

Giddens (in Barry 1999: 98) suggests that in a globalised, mobile world - in which we increasingly relate to the environment as 'sequestered' from other spheres of life - environmental concern is a method by which the individual may seek "moral … and normative security". In popularising environmentally-conscious bushwalking, Dunphy and the 'Mountain Trailers' - middle-class men (and women) who were "product[s] of the age in which [they] lived" (Hutton & Connors 1999: 65) - helped to create a practice that remains reflective of contemporary socio-environmental conditions and interests.

Moreover, participants' bushwalking was also a 'Tasmanian experience', shaped by the social, political, and material conditions of the State. Issues of forestry have also been instrumental in the political landscape of Tasmania. The environment appears to be highly salient to the personal identities of many Tasmanians; see Krien (2012) for a discussion of the importance of environment to the cultural make-up of Tasmania. As such, sense of place is important for self-identity, insofar as it involves belonging to communities, cultures, and material settings. Bushwalking is a performative element of this, and ties sense of place into the self-narrative.

The bushwalking experience

The extracts below are from interviews conducted with 27 Tasmanians about their ontological and emotional experiences of the State's forests. Participants self-selected, based on their interest in forests and forest issues. Sixteen participants were men, eleven women; a wide range of ages were represented, with most participants at or approaching the age of retirement. Most were from the south of the State. The project was advertised primarily through various environmental organisations in Tasmania, and by word-of-mouth. Interviews were thematically analysed, and emergent themes include bushwalking experiences, childhood and family stories, and emotional reactions to forest landscapes.

Not all participants were bushwalkers, nor is bushwalking the focus of my broader PhD project; nevertheless, most spoke to some extent about such experiences. Bushwalking was associated significantly with interest in forest issues, as a performative element of a wider environmental awareness. This awareness encompassed a range of social issues and positions, such as forest conservation, timber access policies, and ambivalence regarding the services provided by Forestry Tasmania; participants' bushwalking practices spoke to diverse knowledge and experiences. While there is arguably a social identity aspect to bushwalking - such as normative expectations around who 'a bushwalker' is, particularly for those participants whose walking was tied to their employment and public image - participants emphasised the intimate, experiential aspects of bushwalking. Bushwalking was apparently perceived as a highly personal activity, even when done with others.

While some authors are particular in their operationalisation of hiking (Svarstad 2010; Collins-Kreiner & Kliot 2017), such restrictions have been consciously avoided here. While several participants expressed their opposition to being seen as a 'serious bushwalker' - "I've never really been what you call a … marathon bushwalker" (Leon) - bushwalks do not necessarily need to be difficult or arduous in order to impact emotions and self-identity. As participant Ben puts it:

> I've found they don't have to be major hikes. Sometimes, [longer walks are] the ones that … leave you with the most energy and passion, but even just short trips I've found to have been really, really important.

While some participants noted it as a benefit, physical fitness and exercise were not identified as the primary goal of bushwalking (although this is perhaps a product of the chosen sampling method, which encouraged participation on the basis of forest attachment rather than an interest in fitness). When participants described bushwalking as being 'good for them', they alluded to a general sense of emotional or mental wellbeing. This speaks not only to a sense of bodily reflexivity, but to the emotional and personal dimensions of bushwalking. The experience of

'wilderness' is closely tied to bushwalking and conservation interests (Hutton and Connors 1999: 68), and the affective dimension of bushwalking can function as an implicit performance of pro-environmental identity, fostering ongoing, relational connections to place:

> I was very young [when I gained] my first impression of 'a forest' … seeds were sown very early on for me. So this is why I feel very attached to the idea that nothing detrimental should happen to Tasmania's unique resource, the forests. (Ken)

Whether in the form of conservationist memoirs (such as Law's 2008 account of the Franklin River campaign), or in the everyday experiences of the study's participants, bushwalking is clearly instrumental in the self-narrative. As per Giddens' (1991) definitions, trajectory and reflexivity play a crucial role in this process.

Trajectory

Bushwalking works to inform a trajectory of the self "from the past to the anticipated future" (Giddens 1991: 75). Participants had usually been long-term bushwalkers, and experienced it as intimately tied to family - that common site of continuous belonging. Many participants traced an interest in bushwalking and environmental awareness to a young age:

> I look at my narrative … things develop and change. [It] started with my dad, when I was a little girl and he loved native Australian plants … So I see that that connection with nature sort of started there. And then I think then, because of that I always loved to be around big trees. (Catherine)

Several participants similarly identified key formative experiences in their bushwalking 'career'. Speaking about outdoor education camps, Jack says:

> You don't realise the effects those camps had on you until you grow up a bit … having that exposure to a wild, natural place at a young age I think is really positive. Even if [you] don't realise at the time.

Svarstad (2010: 104) supports this association between identity and trajectory, suggesting that "hiking provides a sense of continuity not only in a long-ago, historic perspective but also [in an individual's life]". The connection to 'bush' also continues as family situations change, and literature on the effect of abandoning such activities suggests that continuation is not incidental or insignificant (Lovelock et al. 2016). Svarstad (2010: 105) suggests "hiking provides a means to reduce alienation by creating links of belonging … [it also] provides opportunities for people to create a sense of continuity and belonging in their own lives and with their close family".

Family relationships often constituted an important part of the experience. Participants tended to progress from their own early walking experiences, to taking their children or grandchildren walking.

> … we went a lot as children … So we grew up soaking up the environment,
> I guess. [I] still go walking. But not big walks anymore. … because our
> daughter's only nine still, we're starting to think about doing some bigger
> ones now. [It's something I'd like her to grow up with], if she wants to.
> (Marie)

Encompassing different familial roles, bushwalking provides a consistent performative element of family life. The emphasis here is not on how identity changes as the role changes, but on consistency from the past to the future.

Participants also reflected upon bushwalking as marking time in the self-narrative. Broadly, bushwalking connects people to external time cycles such as seasons; a particularly Tasmanian example is travelling to see the 'turning of the fagus', the autumn display of Australia's only native deciduous tree, *Nothofagus gunnii*. Bushwalking also marks personal time, ordering events that are particular to the individual such as work, injuries or retirement.

> I guess in my teens, early teens, I went walking with my dad quite a lot … I
>
> dropped out a bit in my 20s when I was doing uni and things … I'm 52
>
> now, I guess since my late 30s has been when I've been [bushwalking]
>
> possibly the most, and it's been the most important to me. (Ben)

Several participants also identified an 'anticipated future', when they would have more time to bushwalk. By expressing temporal shifts in bushwalking frequency, participants demonstrated that outside events were dealt with reflexively by the act of bushwalking, and a sense of self(-narrative) formed through control of time. This temporal control was often an embodied experience, particularly in the latter stages of the trajectory - aging.

> [I have] the sense of my own infirmity, because I'm 72 years old and I have
>
> to be careful where I go … I can't climb as well as I did, I'm just not as
>
> mobile as I was. (Leon)

While such sentiments were often cloaked in humour, these participants demonstrate, through bushwalking, that the self-narrative has moved from the past (an active youth) to a reflexively embodied present and future.

Reflexivity

Concessions made for injury and aging demonstrate a reflexive embodiment, where decisions are made on the basis of where the self (and the body which 'houses' the self) is 'at' in life. Svarstad (2010) is explicit in her use of 'reflexivity' as a conceptual frame for understanding hikers' motivations, and the interviews conducted as part of this research encouraged participants to reflect upon their own decisions about risk, preparation and health.

In the creation of self-narrative, improvement and experience is seen as being gained through confrontation with acceptable risks (Giddens 1991). This requires reflexive engagement with possibilities of harm, and participants' bushwalking often involved the assessment of risk and

benefit. Depending upon experience and conditions, bushwalking can be an objectively dangerous activity, and participants engaged in preparatory behaviours to mitigate threats. Past experiences of danger and risk were reflected upon ("[injuring my ankle has] made me a bit more cautious" (Claire)). Despite the risks of bushwalking, clearly the participants have deemed it a worthwhile activity. Many seem to base this choice on the conviction that bushwalking is 'good for them' (a motivation also found by Svarstad 2010), and walk more often for this reason. This is "reflexivity of the self extend[ing] to the body" (Giddens 1991: 77), where (mental) health is evaluated and prioritised by the individual. Such a decision also appears to further demarcate time for the participants, who went bushwalking in order to 'top up' on the benefits in order to get through everyday life. After going for a long walk, Claire says:

> … the following week at work I feel completely clear-headed … I find if I
> go on a bushwalk [my working memory is better]. And I just feel so much
> more chill, and just like, not on-edge but you know, a lot more relaxed
> about just working, even.

In order to gain this benefit, participants optimised their experience by engaging in safety precautions such as carrying navigational equipment, or registering their walk with authorities. Advice about weather conditions was heeded:

> … my grandmother and grandfather always said you never go into the bush
> when it's windy, so I don't do that because it's just too unsafe. (Diane)

The preparation of appropriate food was also often identified as an essential step in being 'properly prepared'; as Harper (2015: 419) states, "food acts as [a] central element of bushwalking practice and of a distinctive bushwalker identity." These bushwalking habits are reflexive practices which speak to Giddens' "project of the self" (Giddens 1991: 5).

The relationship bushwalkers have with the natural world is shaped by wider conditions of their social lives. With increasing globalisation, social mobility and, arguably, disembeddedness from the natural environment, bushwalking offers an avenue for a stable, place-based sense of self. Bushwalking is an important means of establishing constancy, stability and belonging; it is an under-researched, but I suggest important, influence upon the development of environmental attitudes and self-identity.

References

Barry, J. 1999, *Environment and Social Theory*, Routledge, London.

Beck, U. 1992, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, SAGE Publications, London.

Cantrill, J.G. 1998, 'The environmental self and a sense of place: Communication foundations
for regional ecosystem management', *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, vol.
26, pp. 301–318. doi:10.1080/00909889809365509

Cheng, A.S., Kruger, L.E. & Daniels, S.E., 2003. '"Place" as an integrating concept in natural
resource politics: Propositions for a social science research agenda', *Society & Natural
Resources* vol. 16, pp. 87–104. doi:10.1080/08941920309199

Clayton, S. & Opotow, S., 2003, *Identity and the Natural Environment*, The MIT Press,
Massachusetts.

Collins-Kreiner, N. & Kliot, N., 2017, 'Why do people hike? Hiking the Israel National Trail',
Journal of Economic and Social Geography. doi: 10.1111/tesg.12245

Drescher, M. 2014, 'What is it like to take care of the land? Towards an understanding of
private land conservation', *Rural Society*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 117–132. doi:
10.5172/rsj.2014.23.2.117

Egoz, S. 2013, 'Landscape and identity: Beyond a geography of one place', in *The Routledge
Companion to Landscape Studies*, eds P. Howard, I. Thompson & E. Waterton,
Routledge, Oxon, pp. 272-285.

Giddens, A. 1991, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Greider, T. & Garkovich, L. 1994, 'Landscapes: The social construction of nature and the environment', *Rural Sociology* vol. 59, pp. 1–24. doi:10.1111/j.1549-0831.1994.tb00519.x

Harper, M. 2015, 'The bushwalkers' diet', *Food, Culture & Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* vol. 18, pp. 419–440. doi:10.1080/15528014.2015.1043106

Hutton, D. & Connors, L. 1999, *A History of the Australian Environment Movement*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Krien, A. 2012, *Into the Woods: The Battle for Tasmania's Forests*, 2nd edn, Black Inc., Victoria, Australia.

Law, G. 2008, *The River Runs Free: Exploring and Defending Tasmania's Wilderness*, Viking: Australia.

Lovelock, B., Jellum, C. & Carr, A. 2016, 'Pulling the pin on active outdoor leisure: Building an understanding of leisure abandonment from the narratives of outdoor recreationists', *Leisure Sciences: An Interdisciplinary Journal* vol. 0, pp. 1–17. doi:10.1080/01490400.2016.1229640

Rennie Short, J. 1991, *Imagined Country: Society, Culture and Environment*, Routledge, London.

Svarstad, H. 2010, 'Why hiking? Rationality and reflexivity within three categories of meaning construction', *Journal of Leisure Research*, vol. 42, pp. 91–110.

Urquhart, J. & Acott, T. 2014, 'A sense of place in cultural ecosystem services: The case of Cornish fishing communities', *Society & Natural Resources*, vol. 27, pp. 3–19. doi:10.1080/08941920.2013.820811v

Whitmarsh, L. & O'Neill, S. 2010, 'Green identity, green living? The role of pro-environmental self-identity in determining consistency across diverse pro-environmental behaviours', *Journal of Environmental Psychology, Identity, Place, and Environmental Behaviour*, vol. 30, pp. 305–314. doi:10.1016/j.jenvp.2010.01.003