

Direct and Mediated Experiences of Wilderness Spirituality: Implications for Wilderness Managers and Advocates

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Abstract—As a result of its elevated level of consciousness, the human species has been engaged in the quest for an ultimate meaning of life and what lies beyond life and death for millennia. Many of these spiritual or religious perspectives have been closely linked to each society's relationship with wild nature. This paper explores the topic of wilderness spirituality from the perspectives of: 1) direct experience, i.e., spiritual experiences and emotions that arise while one is in wilderness, utilizing some of the results from a Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area spiritual values study, and 2) mediated experience, i.e., experiences of spiritual emotions and inspiration that arise while one is outside wilderness but is reflecting, reading or looking at art about wilderness. Direct and mediated experiences of wilderness spirituality can be used as complementary approaches to energise the connections people have with nature and their individual forms of spirituality. Specifically, wilderness areas can be managed in order to enhance opportunities for direct experience. Direct and mediated experiences of wilderness spirituality can be used to promote the values of wilderness and to replenish the souls of wilderness managers and advocates.

Introduction: Wilderness and the Human Mind

The elevated level of consciousness of the human species has facilitated the quest for an ultimate meaning of life and what lies beyond life and death for millennia. Many of these spiritual or religious perspectives have been closely linked to each society's relationship with wild nature. Particular wilderness landscape elements, including wildlife, high places, aesthetics, and pristineness, can create deep emotional and spiritual experiences (McDonald and others 1989), and for those who behold them, can represent the genius loci or special atmosphere or spirit of a place.

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In recent years, we have been thinking and writing about the concepts of wilderness and spirituality and their implications and importance for wilderness managers and advocates (e.g., Kaye 2006a; Ashley 2009, 2012; Tin 2012). This paper represents our collective sensibilities on the topic and contributes to a broader "geography of spirit". As a feeling or perception, spiritual responses to nature can be hard to talk about, elude precise definition, cannot be touched or photographed, and, in an empirical-centric world, are difficult to measure. Real spiritual experience lies beyond symbols and intellectual concepts. However, in order to communicate, we have to use words and concepts and it is necessary to establish at least some basic understanding before the communication can proceed. Therefore, we begin with a few broad working definitions.

Conceptual Underpinnings: Wilderness Spirituality

Traditionally in Western culture spirituality and religiosity have been strongly associated but this is changing as more people seek spiritual nourishment outside of formal religions. Indeed, spirituality can be an entirely secular phenomena (Kaye 2002), with wilderness spirituality having roots in our historical, evolutionary, biological, and psychological past (Kaye 2006a). By spirituality, we mean human's relationship with what moves him most deeply, with what he holds dear. This often is something that is larger than him/herself that transcends his/her isolated sense of self and is often considered as meaningful in some ultimate way (informed by discussions in Ashley (2009: 34-36) and Taylor (2008: vii-x)).

Wilderness spirituality refers to the ability of wilderness to evoke a spiritual response in some people, and thus, creation of an intangible relationship with the natural (wild) environment including landscapes and seascapes and their features. How the relationship is understood and articulated is coloured by each person's previous experiences and belief systems (see Heintzman 2011). For someone who believes in the existence of a transcendent God that created the universe, wilderness protection could represent the noble task of preserving God's work that has been unspoiled by humans (Nagle 2005). For societies that have lived for a long time in close relationship with nature, mountains, forests and lakes can represent sacred places where deities live (Ramakrishnan 2003). "Rational" scientific minds could understand spirituality as a psychological need of the human mind for further evolution, accessible through the physical demands of wilderness experience and the solitude provided by wilderness. These same attributes of wilderness experience can also be propitious for feeling one's connection to

life and the universe, often described in eastern philosophies and nature religions (Kaye 2006a).

Many visitors value wilderness spiritually, the wilderness experience offering opportunities for positive human transformations and concomitant health benefits (Ewert and others 2011), Cumes (1998) labelling the transcendent and healing/restorative effects of wilderness as ‘the wilderness effect’.

A Map for Our Contribution to the “Geography of Spirit”

In this paper we contribute to the “geography of spirit” with discussions from two perspectives:

1. Spiritual experiences and emotions that arise while one is in wilderness [we give this the label of “Direct experience of wilderness spirituality”];
2. Experiences of spiritual emotions, inspiration and connection that arise while one is outside wilderness but is reflecting, reading or looking at art about wilderness [we give this the label of “Mediated experience of wilderness spirituality”].

The first discussion is facilitated by taking a closer look at the study of Ashley (2009) that explored what wilderness spirituality meant to visitors to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA). The second discussion explores how different art forms, specifically, photographs, paintings, and writings, serve as venues to communicate spiritual emotions from the artist to the audience outside wilderness. There have been fewer studies that have focussed on people who do not visit wilderness and whether they value wilderness spiritually. Results from these studies show that spiritual values, though not one of the values that receive the most overwhelming support, is an undeniable value that the non-visiting public attributes to wilderness (see for example, Bengston and others 2010; Cordell and others 1998; 2003). We then provide some suggestions as to how our exploration of wilderness spirituality can be useful to the work of wilderness managers and advocates, and close with some reflections on our contribution.

Spirit in Wilderness: Direct Experience of Spirituality in the Tasmanian Wilderness

In the first large-scale wilderness spiritual values study in Australia (n = 513; response rate 40%), if not elsewhere at the time (2006), a mixed quantitative-qualitative, self-reporting, mail-back questionnaire survey was developed by Ashley (2009) to determine if the TWWHA was valued from a spiritual perspective. The survey instrument was administered to three cohorts – a random sample of the general public in Tasmania (n = 234; 46% of all responses), a stratified sample of Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service staff involved with management of the TWWHA (n = 73; 14%), and a random sample of Tasmanian members of the Australian environmental and conservation group, The Wilderness Society (n = 206; 40%). Generally, the

survey revealed wilderness spirituality to be different from spirituality in general, and unequivocally demonstrated for the first time the existence and importance of the spiritual value of the Tasmanian wilderness. Some key results from the Ashley research follow.

Quantitative Results

In two of 36 Likert-scaled statements included in the study (strongly disagree, disagree, neither disagree or agree, agree, strongly agree), just over three quarters of TWWHA visitors (76%; n = 446) and nearly half of the non-visitors (49%; n = 67) either agreed or strongly agreed that the TWWHA has spiritual value, and 80% of visitors either agreed or strongly agreed that the TWWHA is a place that provides spiritual inspiration.

To more holistically examine how respondents valued the TWWHA spiritually, an inventory of 12 of the 36 scaled items provided a spiritual values index or sub-scale (Table 1). Principal components analysis with direct oblimin rotation for the sample (n = 513) established that the 12 items interdependent. Only one factor was extracted, confirming the value respondents placed on the TWWHA from a spiritual perspective was a unidimensional construct. A single factor was unexpected due to the relative breadth of the variables, although the TWWHA was a constant. The 12 items were moderately to strongly associated with factor loadings from 0.603 to 0.845. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity for the items was significant (< 0.001), indicating that there are significant correlations between the variables. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.948, and Cronbach’s Alpha was 0.931, the latter suggesting that all items are reliable and the scale is internally consistent.

The spiritual values index (Table 1 variables) for each cohort and for the sample showed a high level of valuing the spirituality of the TWWHA. Out of a maximum index value of five, Wilderness Society members had the highest index (3.97; s = 0.81, n = 206), followed by TWWHA managers (3.69; s = 0.99, n = 73) and the general public (3.47; s = 0.87, n = 234), the inter-cohort index differences being significant. The sample norm was 3.70 (s = 0.89, n = 513).

Qualitative Results

To more fully explore what wilderness spirituality represented to respondents, an open-ended question provided them the opportunity to express their own meanings. This they did with relish, 290 respondents (57% of the sample) generously providing some 12,700 words affirming the spiritual value of wilderness. Following content analysis and theme development, the defining characteristics of wilderness spirituality could be identified (Table 2).

The qualitative question was most revealing in determining the essential characteristics of wilderness spirituality, albeit relatively broadly (Table 2). Substantially extending what we already know about this intangible value, it is now considered more grounded in practical terms, and thus, a more accessible concept.

Table 1—The 12 item sub-scale measuring the degree to which survey respondents (n = 513) valued the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) spiritually.

Forests in the TWWHA provide opportunities for spiritual experiences
I believe that the TWWHA has spiritual value
The very wildness of the TWWHA generates a spiritual energy
Mountains in the TWWHA provide opportunities for spiritual experiences
The TWWHA provides spiritual inspiration
Every kind of water – waterfalls, mist, pools, deep water, white water, whirlpools, still water, oceans – contributes strongly to the spiritual landscape of the TWWHA
TWWHA spirituality involves a sense of unity, relationship, and connection with all of existence
The deprivation, exhaustion, challenge, and even the danger we find in the TWWHA can bring spiritual joy
The TWWHA is special because it is a sacred place
The TWWHA can cause a shift in my personal identity, from “I” to something greater than myself
For me, the spiritual value of the TWWHA can be found in an opportunity to escape from hectic, daily life
Spiritual benefits of the TWWHA may exist even for those people who have not visited this wilderness area

Table 2—Defining characteristics of wilderness spirituality, from most to least common (n = 290).

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- Feelings of inner peace and tranquility contributing to personal contentment
 - Physical, mental and emotional refreshment thereby life enhancing
 - Connection and relationship with nature and increased understanding taking one beyond or outside the self
 - Feelings of awe and wonder about nature and life
 - Feelings of happiness and inspiration
 - A respect for and valuing of nature contributing to a change in personal values
 - A feeling of humility and self-forgetting resulting in ego detachment
 - A religious meaning and explanation may be present
 - A heightened sense of awareness and elevated consciousness beyond the everyday and corporeal world conducive to possible transcendent experiences
 - Motivation to protect and sustain wilderness areas inducing a sense of personal responsibility for their custodianship and stewardship
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Source: Ashley 2012, p. 7.

Discussion

The results of the benchmark TWWHA study show that beyond its role as a recreation opportunity, tourist destination, or object of scientific curiosity, the Tasmanian wilderness is also an area providing settings in which people can have profound and life-changing experiences.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches provide complementary information that can be of use to the wilderness manager. The quantitative approach provides a newly developed scale that can be potentially useful for monitoring how visitors value the spiritual values of the Tasmanian wilderness over time, and for assessing how people spiritually value other wilderness areas. The qualitative approach provides more in-depth information from multiple dimensions that managers can use to better understand the characteristics of wilderness spirituality and the key conditions that are necessary to facilitate such experiences.

Communicating Spirit in Wilderness: Mediated Experience of Wilderness Spirituality

Art, e.g., images, words, music and movement, can elicit deep emotional responses from humans. Focussing on the same tools of images and words as used in Ashley (2009), we examine specifically how the media of painting, photography and writing have been used as venues to express the artist's passion for the divine as experienced in the natural world.

Mesmerizing Images

Classical Chinese landscape (san-shui) paintings from the 7th to 13th centuries were influenced by the Taoist sense of mystical communion with the natural world. Paintings depicted not only a physical landscape but also its atmosphere and spiritual topography (Clarke 2000). From the 14th century onwards, Japanese landscape paintings (sansuiga) were influenced by Zen Buddhism and glorified nature as a source of meditative insight (Hoover 1978). Russian artist Nicholas Roerich painted scenes of the Himalayas, Mongolia and Central Asia at the end of the 19th/beginning of the 20th century. Teasdale (1999: 188,191) put forward that Roerich's paintings were "intentionally meant to communicate a sense of the divine presence through the human encounter with ultimate beauty in the cosmos... Viewing his works, one enters this reality. It leads one beyond the image to what does not change, to the divine itself. Roerich is always trying to bring us to this realm that transcends this impermanent existence. His art is an attempt to invoke this reality for us, to stir it within the depths of our inner life".

Taylor (2010: 166-7) put forward that Ansel Adams' striking black-and-white landscape photographs of California's Sierra Nevada was "the archetypal exemplar of photographic nature religion" as Adams "sought to evoke a perception of the sacred in nature". Dunaway (2005, 2006) showed how Eliot Porter, Subhankar Banerjee and other American landscape photographers used their cameras to visualise their faith in nature, portraying wilderness as a hallowed place.

In the Ashley (2009) study reported above, respondents were shown colour photographs of the TWWHA as surrogates for the actual experience of being in the Tasmanian wilderness. Analysed quantitatively, the data suggest that the variables beautiful, natural, remote, quiet, and peaceful most reflected the spiritual content of the images. Images that most consistently evoked a spiritual response by respondents commonly contained ephemeral components such as clouds, waters reflections, waves and mist and a special quality of light such as mountain glow and light filtered through trees.

Power of Words

While requiring more active imagination and participation from the reader, writings on wilderness are no less powerful a medium for communicating the spiritual connection to the land and evoking spiritual emotions in the reader. America has a long tradition of nature writing (Mitchell 2003; Lyon 2001). In many of their writings, writers expressed the spiritual truths that they have discovered in wilderness. John Muir referred to the forests and fields below Mt Shasta as "God's country" (Wolfe 2003:180). Sigurd Olson infused his writings with his wilderness theology (Backes 1997). Gary Snyder steeped his poetry in his Taoist and Zen Buddhist sensibilities (Tan 2009). Although the language varied depending on the writers' religious backgrounds many of their writings shared the commonalities of awe, reverence and humility in the face of the immensity of wilderness.

Cole (2005) and Schroeder (2007) discussed the idea that wilderness can be symbols of distinct meanings to different people. Through interviews with wilderness visitors and research of wilderness literature Kaye (2000) concluded that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has become a "condensation symbol" which summarises a range of symbolic meanings, each of which has different relevance to each individual. One of the symbolic meanings evoked by the Arctic Refuge is that of a sacred place and this sacredness could be in religious or secular terms depending on the propensity of the person involved. Sanders (2008: 608-10) compared wilderness to the Biblical Sabbath. Just as the Sabbath is a time set aside for "the cultivation of spirit", wilderness is a place set aside "to call us back to ourselves" and to remind us that "we are answerable to a reality deeper and older and more sacred than our own will". In a contemplation on an environmental ethic suitable for Antarctica, Rolston (2002: 134) concluded by proposing its designation as the "Antarctic Sanctuary", a place set aside to realise deeper perspectives, a "wonderland place sacrosanct", where humans act radically differently from how we act on the other six continents.

Implications for Wilderness Managers and Advocates

What do our discussions mean for the work of wilderness managers and advocates? In the following sections we provide some suggestions on how direct and mediated experiences of wilderness spirituality can be used and facilitated by wilderness managers and advocates.

For Wilderness Managers Managing Wilderness Areas for Visitors

Wilderness spirituality research contributes to what Watson (2004: 7) described as a new era of public land stewardship concerning “stewarding the relationship between the public and public lands”. If some members of the public visit wilderness for its spiritual values, how might this relationship between spirituality and wilderness be stewarded? Here are some suggestions:

- Visitor centres provide information on spiritual values of wilderness or at least its acknowledgment. The experience of being in the visitor centre can be designed to evoke atmospheres infused with spiritual overtones (as Mitchell (2007) noted in Yosemite National Park).
- Interpretation/interpretive signage sympathetic to spiritual values can be created.
- Provision is made for particular landscape characteristics to be seen or experienced to foster spiritual opportunities via, for example, track routing.
- Training of wilderness managers and administrators can include spiritual values appreciation and awareness.
- Guides and tour operators can be informed of the spiritual values of wilderness areas.
- Spiritual values are included as one of the social indicators used in future determinations of wilderness quality and as part of future wilderness designation criteria.
- Safeguard opportunities for silence and solitude, as they can be key conditions that facilitate wilderness spiritual experiences.
- In communication materials, use loosely defined religious language and do not prescribe a certain dogmatic lens through which wilderness spirituality should be experienced. This encourages visitors to imbue their own individual spiritual meaning into their experience and embrace it as their own (Mitchell 2007).

In 2008, the IUCN produced a set of guidelines for the management of sacred natural sites in protected areas (Wild and McLeod 2008). While this document refers to sites that have had a long history of human-nature interactions, e.g. sacred forests in Kenya and sacred mountains in Nepal, some of the guidelines can be applicable to the management of wilderness areas:

- Recognise that sacred natural sites exist in all of the IUCN protected area categories and governance types.
- Recognise that sacred natural sites have great significance for the spiritual well-being of many people and that cultural and spiritual inspiration are part of the ecosystem services that nature provides.
- Recognise that sacred natural sites integrate social, cultural, environmental and economic values into holistic management models that are part of the tangible and intangible heritage of humankind.
- Develop supportive communication, education and public awareness programmes.
- Accommodate and integrate different ways of knowing, expression and appreciation in the development of policies and educational materials.
- Understand and manage visitor pressures and develop appropriate policies, rules, codes of conduct, facilities and practices for visitor access to sacred sites.

For Wilderness Managers and Advocates Promoting the Values of Wilderness

Some of the points raised above are also relevant for wilderness managers and advocates seeking support for designated wilderness areas or for the legal designation of new areas. Extolling the virtues of direct experience of wilderness experience and using art about wilderness, managers and advocates can develop communication, education and public awareness programmes of the spiritual values of wilderness. In these communications, managers and advocates can highlight that:

- Wilderness spirituality has great significance for the spiritual well-being of many people (e.g. Table 2).
- Spiritual inspiration is part of the cultural ecosystem services that nature provides.
- Wilderness spirituality is part of the tangible and intangible heritage of humankind.

Increasingly, accounting and payment for ecosystem services and biodiversity is being used to support the management of protected areas and resolve land use conflicts (TEEB 2010; Watson and Venn 2012). If intangible values, like spiritual and intrinsic values, can be included in the process without losing their fundamental nature and ultimate meanings, then that will ensure that the final “visible” picture of the values of nature and wilderness will be fuller and more complete (Cordell and others 2005; Harmon and Putney 2003).

For the Spiritual Replenishment of Wilderness Managers and Advocates

If according to Barnes (2003) wilderness is contested ground, then wilderness managers and advocates are right in the middle of it. Reflecting on her 20 years of experience working in the US Forest Service and managing wilderness, Oreskes (2006: 7) wrote: “There always will be people who tell you what you want is impossible, or that what you’re advocating is impractical and too idealistic. Those people can make an awful lot of noise, but we can’t let them stop us.” For many environmental advocates, the spirituality-related experiences they have had in nature are the motivations and reasons behind their engagement (see for example, Taylor 2010, 2012; Backes 1997; Kaye 2006b).

To sustain their passion and motivation in their work, wilderness managers and advocates not already conscious of the spiritual value of wilderness would probably benefit from regular experiences of wilderness spirituality. Immersing oneself in the silence and solitude of wilderness, one gains perspective and is refreshed, replenished, renewed, spiritually, emotionally and psychologically. However, it is not always possible to take time out to be in wilderness. In this case, regular mediated experiences, via nature contemplation, reading, reflection, looking at photographs or watching films about wilderness, can help to renew one’s spiritual connection with wilderness and provide the needed boost to sustain the long hours inside windowless offices.

Conclusions

Based on the discussions above, we suggest that:

- Direct experience of wilderness spirituality is a multi-dimensional construct that can touch on the wilderness visitor's feelings and emotions, sense of connection with existence and his/her ultimate meaning, and elevate his/her consciousness in possibly transcendental experiences.
- Art – through images and words – is a venue through which artists can express their sense of spirituality about nature. When viewing artworks about wilderness audience may experience spiritual feelings and inspiration when outside wilderness. Artworks about wilderness can communicate ideas of wilderness being a symbol of the sacred.
- Direct and mediated experiences of wilderness spirituality can be used as complementary approaches to energise the connections that people have with nature and their (individual forms of) spirituality.

In an increasingly urbanised and busy world, experiences in wilderness are more the exception than the norm. Wilderness areas are by nature difficult to travel to and wilderness experiences often demand significant investments of time, resources and organisation. For most people most of the time, wilderness remains a mental concept. Through mediated experiences, it is a concept that can be maintained in good health or even encouraged to flourish even when one is far away from wilderness. Furthermore, direct experience in wilderness is not always desirable, possible or even beneficial for some individuals, for example, as a result of poor health and lack of interest or knowledge. Large numbers of people travelling to remote wilderness areas can lead to undesirable environmental impacts (see for example, Eijgelaar and others 2010 on greenhouse gas emissions and impact on climate change from Antarctic tourism). In these cases mediated experiences are essential in order to maintain at least some level of connection to and reverence for wilderness.

We close with some reflections on the difficulties of objectifying and describing something that is intensely personal and which often escapes intellectual conceptualisation.

This paper may be seen as promoting the objectification of wilderness spirituality by seeking to 'define' it and also in the proffering of strategies to manage it. It is possible that our endeavours may in fact diminish the spiritual value of wilderness. A tension exists, we believe, between a perceived need for managers to know what it is they are managing, and the intangibility of the spiritual dimension of wilderness, which, by default, may defy management due to this intangibility. If all becomes known, and the sense of mystery that can pervade wild areas becomes commodified, then maybe it could lose its appeal or its value? Perhaps respect is all that is needed. We could simply acknowledge that wilderness can engender a spiritual response for some people and then do very little other than show the place respect for that reason. Just alerting people, particularly managers, to the fact that the spiritual dimension is a valued attribute of wilderness may be enough. Indeed, the promotion of the spiritual value of natural areas may be counterproductive

if potential visitors are not motivated to visit for spiritual reasons in the first place (Hazen 2009). Spiritual experiences in or spiritual inspirations from wilderness are not the only ways that humans may touch the ineffable.

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