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Ecotourism and the development of environmental literacy in Australia

It is contended in the paper that the environmental education component of ecotourism in Australia has the *potential* to facilitate change in environmental beliefs of clients. However, the main assertion of the paper is that there are significant barriers to the realisation of this potential, including obstacles that arise from the continuities which have dominated Australian society over the past two hundred years. It is argued that these obstacles need to be taken into account in the quest for more effective environmental learning within Australian ecotourism.

Key Words: ecotourism, environmental learning, environmental literacy, environmental beliefs, numinous experiences, progress.

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Introduction

It is contended in this article that the environmental education component of Australian ecotourism has the *potential* to facilitate change in environmental beliefs in clients through operators communicating with people to enrich their understanding and appreciation of their world and their role within it. Australia's natural environment also provides many opportunities for ecotourism operators to provide, or to satisfy the demand for, numinous experiences (Maines & Glynn, 1993), a key contributor to the development of affection for the environment which is regarded as important for the advancement of environmental literacy (Kimmel, 1999). However, the main assertion of the article is that there are significant barriers to the realisation of this potential, including obstacles that arise from the continuities which have dominated Australian society over the past two hundred years. For example, progress is still seen largely in terms of Western ideology and exploitation of resources, and the Australian economy continues to be largely reliant on primary exports, a milieu which presents problems to at least some environmental educationists because of the dominance of the 'conquest of nature' theme.

Ecotourism in its Australian milieu

In order to assess the potential impact of Australian ecotourism experiences on the development of environmental literacy of clients, the cultural, historical and environmental context needs to be explored. Included in this exploration must be consideration of myth-making since myths determine and shape our experience of environment and make a very important contribution to the development of a perceived national identity (Tacey, 1995), however amorphous and elusive that might be in reality.

According to the most well-known analysis of the origins of Australian society, including its myths and its concomitant attitudes, most Australians identify with characteristics which first found expression most markedly in the frontier life of the nomad pastoral workers of the outback and which, in turn, permeated Australian society and culture generally. It was argued that this 'nomad tribe' possessed the qualities of independence and self-sufficiency, strong sentiments of mateship and a love of freedom and, albeit sometimes grudgingly, of the land itself. The bushman's ethos permeated and coloured that of the trade union movement, which in turn spread it through wide sections of the Australian community (Ward, 1958).

Although this analysis focused on the development of the 'Australian legend', an attempt was made to place the Australian tradition in the wider perspective of European and American thought and history. Parallels were drawn between frontier life in America and in Australia, the 'noble frontiersman' acquiring that nervous energy which became a frontier characteristic and the frontiersman becoming a typical representative of his countryman (Turner, 1893, 1992), however ludicrous that image might be in reality. This frontier or outback image is still powerful in Australia, as shown by the popularity of films and television series based on outback adventures, and contributes to the continuities apparently adhered to by most Australians. These continuities include belief in the innately 'natural' virtue of nationalism, in the inevitability of 'progress', and in the self-evident superiority of Western civilisation.

These characteristics have been at the core of the traditional Australian myths, including the original idea of *terra nullius* which embraced the notion that the country was essentially 'unsettled' and 'unmodified' by Aboriginal occupation (Jones, 1985), the spread throughout Australian society of the 'bushman's ethos' and egalitarianism, often expressed as mateship

amongst men (Ward, 1958), and human progress / development commensurate with the degree of control attained over nature (Lines, 1991).

These myths have not only been recurring themes in many studies of Australia, but have also provided much material and inspiration for artists, writers and industrialists. Evidence of the themes is provided by the subdued landscapes of painters such as Arthur Streeton and Hans Heysen, by the evocative 'bush' poetry of Paterson (Paterson, 1989) who popularised the romantic figure of the bushman for city dwellers in Australia and by the exhortations of industrialists to develop in the 'national interest' (Morgan, 1988).

The above observations do not imply that the traditional myths always have been accepted without question in academic or in popular circles. For example, concerns about the 'conquest of nature' were expressed in 1925 by Sir Douglas Mawson, famous Antarctic explorer and Professor of Geology at Adelaide University (Lines, 1991), in 1943 and 1953 by the poets Marie E.J. Pitt (1944) and Judith Wright (1990) respectively. Despite these examples of concern about Australia's progress with its emphasis on the conquest of nature, however, most Australians still appear to adhere to views which were moulded to a considerable extent by eighteenth century socio-political revolutionary activity and by the Industrial Revolution (Alomes, 1991).

The ideas of the French Revolution of 1789 were shaped by the rational optimism of the Enlightenment and survived as the heritage on which the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, willingly or unwillingly, built their philosophy. The Enlightenment ideas of progress, economic growth and development were transported to Australia and employed, often using products of the Industrial Revolution, in the conquest of nature.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the spread of industrial capitalism and a vast increase in wealth in much of the Western world meant that most of its people could agree on the certainty of some progress, and could accept the idea of progress almost as an axiom (Pollard, 1971). Few Westerners, including Australians, doubted that progress in the knowledge of the environment of mankind, in the physical and biological sciences and in the continuing improvement in technology derived from them would continue. They believed that their idea of progress would lead to greater wealth, to an improvement in the material conditions of life and to a happier human destiny. Despite times of pessimism such as during World War 1, the economic depression of the 1930s and World War 2, the vast majority of people in the Western world assumed that progress, as they saw it, was inevitable. Australians, as part of a Western, capitalistic society, overwhelmingly agreed and, despite some demonstrable dissent from the traditional view of progress (see, for example, Tacey, 1995), apparently still do. The widespread adherence to this view in Australia is seen by this author as a major obstacle to the development of operational environmental literacy whereby an individual has the capacity to regularly perceive environmental issues, gather and evaluate relevant information, examine and choose among alternatives and take positions and actions that work to sustain and develop the foundations of environmental knowledge (Roth, 1991).

Conclusion

It is generally accepted that ecotourism should be environmentally educative. *How* that should be done in Australia (and elsewhere) remains problematic. A major barrier to effective environmental learning is the apparent adherence of most Australians, including a significant proportion of those who might engage in ecotourism experiences, to the dominant Western paradigm of progress. If the modification of environmental beliefs of clients is occur, then this adherence at least needs to be taken into account in the quest for more effective environmental learning within Australian ecotourism.

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