

Trumpeter (1997)

ISSN: 0832-6193

Sensual Awareness in Wildlands Tripping: A Path to
Connection with the Wilds

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GARY MORGAN: Whenever possible Gary spends his time in communion with Wilds, he especially feels a kinship with the trees. He has worked in the camping field, as well as a guide of wildland trips with youths and adults alike. Most of his energy over the past ten years has been as a guide with White Squall, a Sea Kayak Centre located on Georgian Bay.

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The role wilderness recreation plays in the promotion of wildlands advocacy is an important question. As the field of Adventure Recreation gains popularity, lexicons of ecology and wildlands protection are being utilized to promote the ventures. As a wildlands guide and an wildlands advocate, I too believe there is a significant contribution the outdoor recreation experience can make to the goals of wildlands advocacy. Yet, I am wary of many of the assumptions underlying the popular arguments put forward by the outdoor industry (Morgan, 1994).

I have witnessed wilderness trip experience as a way to provide people with the opportunity to intimately bond with the Wilds.¹ I have also witnessed the trip experience in the context of an adversarial event, an event to be challenged and conquered. The fundamental difference between the two experiences centres around the prejudice of the paradigm informing the participant's perspective. One model perceives the Wilds as a nurturing place full of wonder and mystery, while the other perceives the Wilds as a hostile object.

As a wildland advocate, I share Thomas Berry's contention that to be an effective proponent of Nature, the advocate must feel an intimate contact with the Earth's communities. Thomas Berry (1991:iii, in Maclean & Carr), writes:

Just as humans cannot endure being ignored by the other members of the human community, so is this also true of the larger Earth community. Intimacy with its human component is vital to the integral functioning and survival of the planet we live on.

Even though we foster ecological and environmental movements throughout the planet, even though we seek to save the rainforests and to renew the regions we have devastated, none of this will ultimately

succeed unless it expresses a true intimacy with this larger Earth community.

Berry's passionate words speak of the need to intimately connect with the communities of the Earth, including the Wilds. It was with this belief in mind that I set out to explore the role of sensuality and the Wilds and how this can impact on the outdoor recreator's approach.

To develop my concept of this project, I first had to explore my own connections to the Wilds. I realized that I did not learn to speak with the Wilds, until I had first felt the Wilds as part of who and what I was. I did not know if this experience was common to others, or if I could bring others to discover this experience for themselves. Once research began, I found that my experiences were indeed common among many peoples. It was from this base of knowledge that I designed the travel experience.

It is my belief that humans, as sensual beings, must connect with their sensual selves if we are to develop a perception of the Wilds that is nurturing. The sexual connotation of the term "sensuality" should not be confused with sexuality. *The Oxford Dictionary* (1989, p.989) has identified four meanings for "sensual." Although noted as not being culturally relevant, the definition of sensual I wish to use is as follows:

The part of the nature of humanity that is concerned with the senses; chiefly, the animal instincts and appetites; the lower nature as distinguished from reason.

Apart from the inference to a hierarchy of knowing, this definition does address the context in which the sensual was used in my exploration.

To explore this avenue of inquiry, I guided a trip on the French River, a semi-remote wilderness Waterway Park and designated Canadian Heritage River in Ontario's Near North. The tripping group consisted of six adult participants, one of whom had the role of process observer or ethnographer. All efforts were made to assemble a group of individuals with a wide range of past wilderness experience and perspectives on the Wilds. The group members were provided with pre-trip information that included knowledge of the project's objectives, including the examination of the role wilderness recreation plays in forming our perceptions of the Wilds.²

The nine day trip was broken down into two distinct phases. The first three days centred on adventure recreation. During this phase, we maintained a base camp and focused our energies on paddling skill development at several locally accessible sets of rapids. Days four to nine were structured around the sharing of experiences and activities that heightened sensual awareness, providing an opportunity to commune or bond with the Wilds. The sensory

skill component of the program was based on the works of several environmental educators, including Cohen (1994) and Cornell (1989). Apart from the sensory skills, there was a spiritual component based on animistic traditions of Native North American cultures. This animistic component was guided by the writings of Dolfyn (1990) and Sams (1990), two contemporary aboriginal shamans, and Byrd Bailor, a Native American author.

The trip's design and implementation proved to be a challenge from a logistics perspective. Route decisions were based upon my experience of a typical recreational trip, both in terms of distance travelled and difficulty. The time dedicated to travel each day, however, was in direct conflict with the time necessary for people to explore their surroundings and make connections. MJ, one of the group members, summed up this conflict when she turned to me one evening and said, "You can't communicate if you don't listen, and it takes time to listen to a tree."

The issue of time continually resurfaced. The plan was to travel and explore throughout the day. Camp would then be made wherever we ended up at day's end. This way of travelling was resisted, as participants constantly questioned if we could we really afford the time to explore. Therefore, the daily plan was altered to address the group members' concerns and although some opportunities to explore were lost, participants were better able to relax and open up to the Wild communities around them.

The structuring of time was not our only concern. Because of the emphasis on developing intuitive knowledge based experiences, restrictions not normally placed on participants of a wilderness trip were put in place. These restrictions included the removal of watches, banning of cameras, and only limited access to route maps. Once again, these restrictions were initially met with resistance, although were later reported by all group members as helpful in reaching the objective of focusing in the present.

The ideal of focusing on the present was key to the success of the project. Communion with the Wilds came only after minds were open and receptive to the possibility of communion. To get to that place of being, people identified several environmental conditions they needed in order to focus and clear their minds. First, participants had to feel absolved from all other trip responsibilities for a significant period of time in the day. Second, it was essential to have a social environment that supported the sharing of thoughts, ideas, and customs, while looking for common understanding. People had to feel a sense of security in the group community. By creating a safe environment, their minds could be open to the possibilities of communing with the Wilds and supporting their inner child's sense of wonder. Role modelling, a genuine excitement for discovery, and insuring an environment that group members could feel safe exploring in, were necessary roles of leadership.

Story telling and journaling were also important to the group process, as stories

presented ideas and concepts in a non-threatening way that opened the mind to the many possibilities. The journal gave people a place to dump thoughts that blocked their way to the present. It also helped them to focus and express the ideas and feelings they felt, as they explored the freedom of the present. Activities were encouraged that improved sensory skills and a group culture that explored and perceived the Wilds from alternative perspectives. The focus was on taking notice of the surroundings, keying into the thoughts and feelings these experiences provided and then expressing these feelings in a variety of forms. In support of this focus, rational explanations or scientific identification of wildlife and/or natural phenomena were not actively pursued.

In essence we were attempting to nurture a sense of wonder. The concept of wonder must not be under emphasized. Neil Evernden (1985:140), states: "If the world is nothing but machination of energy exchange, then it is understood as such and not as a source of wonder." Rachel Carson (1965, p.43) in her book, *The Sense of Wonder*, further expressed the importance of wonder, and the child-like place where it resides. She writes:

"If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote to the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the alienation from the sources of strength."

Evernden and Carson both assert that a sense of wonder is vital to our perceptions. With this in mind, the fostering of a sense of Wonder was central to this travel experience.

The project outcomes were evaluated employing naturalistic inquiry as the analytical tool of choice. Once collected, the data were analyzed and an exploration of the potential of outdoor recreation as a tool of environmental advocacy was undertaken. As anticipated, past experience, training and cultural influences of the individual group members greatly influenced the meaning placed on the experience. Short term influences were evident through observation, as well as through journal entries. Long term impacts were much more difficult to delineate, as the process of merging the significant events of the trip with the experiences of the participants' daily lives is an ongoing and ever changing process, and beyond the scope of this study.

The impacts of this program focus were felt by all trip participants. It is best, however, to let the words of the participants tell their own stories. The following story comes from Bill's journal, after an exercise in which the group first listened to and then drew the sounds they heard in a marsh. Before reading the passage, however, it must be noted that Bill, at thirty nine, had canoe tripped since the age of five.

I feel like I'm sitting in front of a huge symphony. I am blown backwards not by the volume but by the intensity of simplistic rhythms blended together into a sedate, mellow uplifting melody. The more you listen, the more intricate and complex and amazing the "music" becomes . . . it is leading me to where I should be - it clarifies my needs from my wants.

Later, during his post trip interview, Bill reflected on this experience and others like it. When asked if these experiences were valued he answered:

Absolutely, they forced me to expand my perceptions or perceptual base and as a teacher of environmental science it's easy to characterize things. Take the marsh for instance, if I teach marsh studies looking at my specific criteria, I lose all the secondary criteria which make the particular marsh or tree an individual. The trip opened my perceptions up to see that every marsh I paddled by was a unique individual. You cannot characterize one to describe the whole.

Despite a life time of paddling, Bill's sensual experiences, as he himself describes, were fresh and provocative. Bill's experience was not unique within the group. Everyone reported feeling a bond or sense of communion to varying degrees. For some, these feelings were part of an anticipated set of experiences they had participated in before and wished to re-create. For others, these experiences were new and provided the participant with new insights into issues. For all, this bonding, or sense of communion, was an important life experience with impacts reaching into other areas of their lives.

Charlene, as an example, recounted a story at her post trip interview. She reported that upon returning from the trip she felt a need to connect with her children in the way she did with Nature. "I realized I wasn't really connecting with my kids, but just meeting their needs and answering their questions. I wasn't really smelling the roses." Joe also expressed feeling a deep bond with the Wilds, and put it in context for himself outside the tripping experience. During his interview he stated:

I've learned the inner connectedness of everything and the importance of not isolating things into little packages . . . It becomes an issue of personal responsibility, it makes it more personal and, in doing so, more important to act upon.

Both Charlene and Joe's stories speak of altered perceptual outlooks, created in part by their experience in the Wilds. Although these altered perceptions do not necessarily translate into long term behavioral changes, they do support a process of deep questioning long held opinions and perspectives on issues. ¶T¶

All participants identified significant events, while in the Wilds, as having challenged or altered their perceptions. Four of the six participants reported that trip events altered their perceptual base on some level, while the other two group members indicated that past wilderness experiences had altered their perceptions. Everyone agreed that through the sensual experience they were provided with opportunities that allowed for alternative ways of seeing.

The final question, however, of whether or not this experience increased support for wildlands protection, remains. To answer this question I looked to the reactions of the three group members who had no previous experience with wildlands advocacy work. All three of the group members felt they made substantial gains during the trip and had translated those gains in some small way into their lives back home. However, when asked if they would actively support a cause that advocated further protection of the Wild, their answers did not substantially change from the views expressed on the pre-trip questionnaire.

Does this mean the project was a failure? I do not believe so. The provision of meaning to a learning experience is the domain of the learner. Meaning is informed by a collection of the learners life's stories. It is my observation that to alter perspectives that are taught and reinforced throughout one's life, not only takes time, but takes numerous experiences that will call into question the commonly-held views. True epiphanic events are rare. They are most often the result of many subtle discrepant events that slowly bring about new understandings which, in turn, leads to change. The reported experiences of the trip membership support my observation. The events of the trip did not motivate an immediate change in behavior, but the participants did report experiencing conflict between perspectives held prior to the trip and those afterwards. I believe that it is this internal conflict, a cognitive dissonance that opens the way to significant long-term change. With new knowledge traditional perspectives are no longer secure, and the door is open for fresh understanding, provided that the alternative ways of knowing are supported and reinforced.

Central to this assumption is the need for ongoing follow-up and support for the initial experience. It is at this point I must question the "common truth," or myth, which suggests that by simply "getting people out there" we are making a difference. This project's findings suggest that even the most positive experience may not create significant change to long held perspectives. At best, we can create a positive experience that motivates people to continue exploring the Wilds. The myth, however, implies that the trip experience, as an isolated event, promotes change.

This project demonstrated that time and an open mind, free from outside distractions, were important to people's success at communing with the Wilds. It is possible for these conditions to be met without the structure this project provided. However, without some forethought, it is at best a hit and miss proposition. Bill, for example, had paddled for over thirty years and had never felt the connections to the Wilds this trip experience provided. Most felt that these

experiences could not be willed, but by actively seeking out opportunities to intimately relate to the Wilds, the bonds could be forged.

In the introduction, I made reference to the fact that wilderness tripping is often promoted as a tool of wildlands advocacy. However, most adventure based wilderness trips depend on high technology and promote external validation through high risk activities. I do not dispute the evidence that these experiences can contribute to the psychological well-being of participants, as this type of personal growth was witnessed during the project. I do, however, suggest that by their very design these busy and active programs may actually undermine the conditions necessary for developing an intimate knowledge of the Wilds through communion.

This project began with an intention to explore the place of "the sensual" in the wilderness canoe trip and its role as a tool for wildlands advocacy. Implicit is the belief that wildlands advocacy must view the Wilds as having intrinsic worth. One way of coming to this understanding is by establishing intimate contact with the Wilds through our sensual selves. This way of knowing has little value in Western culture, as it calls into question established utilitarian perspectives of the Wilds. The experience of this project affirms my belief that well-designed wilderness tripping programs have the potential to broaden outlooks and assist us in making the "Earth connections" that Thomas Berry spoke of as being essential. Wilderness tripping demands a more basic lifestyle and in doing so, provides travellers with an opportunity to step back, reflect, and to open their minds to the Earth's wisdom and energies. The travel experiences, like all educational experiences, merely provide opportunities to grow. If we are not ready to grasp the opportunity, that potential will not be realized. If we do take hold of the opportunity, the wilderness experience can become a path to discovery, rekindling our sense of wonder, and revitalizing our souls through communion with our first home - the Wilds.

Notes

1. My preference is to use the term "the Wilds" as an alternative to "Nature" to describe an area of interrelated undomesticated communities. The word is capitalized as a show of respect for the entity that the Wilds collectively represents.

2. The small sample group size, the open process of Naturalistic inquiry and the appearance of a generic demographic sample may have biased the result to some degree. However, the demographics of the group do fall within the expected demographics of the adventure/outdoor recreator. Furthermore, it was never the intent of this project to draw hard and fast conclusions about the Wildlands trip experience. The experiences of the six individuals, however, allowed me an

opportunity to explore a diverse collection of thoughts and ideas. In doing so, general trends were identified that I believe should be considered when planning and implementing eco-tourism based Wildlands tripping programs.

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Citation Format

Morgan, Gary (1997) Sensual Awareness in Wildlands Tripping: A Path to Connection with the Wilds *Trumpeter*: 14, 2. <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.14.2.17>

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