

Ecocentrism: A personal story

It has been noted that (early childhood) experiences with nature enhance environmental values (Wells and Lekies, 2006). These findings suggest that nature activities in childhood and youth are key pathways that lead people to take an interest in nature and later work for its protection. Yet, early exposure alone does not explain why some people who grow up next to forests do not try to stop the logging, while others from the same villages do. This question of why some come to ecocentrism and some do not is fascinating. Like others, I have no perfect answer. In the documentary film *If a Tree Falls: A story of the Earth Liberation Front*, environmental activist Daniel McGowan reflects that he grew up as a typical 'city boy'. He came to care about nature from watching a film about deforestation when he was in his 20s (Kopnina, 2014b). It appears difficult to discern why some individuals choose to stand up for nature and others do not; this commitment seems to vary individually, independent of culture, as I describe in my articles and books. In reflecting what wilderness means for me, I have three lived experiences to relate.

The first is about me growing up in Moscow, USSR, with my parents being ardent hikers. My parents were dissident sympathizers, and on their trips to the wild areas of Russia – Karelia, the White Sea region, the Ural mountains – they used wilderness as places of *freedom*. We were climbing mountains, sailing lakes and rivers in *baidarkas* (Russian canoes), walking animal paths in the woods with huge backpacks, sitting around the fire, cooking fish we caught and mushrooms and berries we gathered, and singing songs (my father and uncle played

guitar). Being there was like sitting in an open temple, with pine branches forming flying buttresses and with curious spectators such as deer on the night watch peering through the shadows. Our songs, although not religious, seemed to reach all the way up to heaven. My parents and their adult friends talked about politics – something they did not dare do in the city. The granite rocks and the northern pine forests kept their secrets. I wrote about it a few years later, reflecting on the death of my father, Nikolai Kopnin (<https://is.gd/8yDiW4>; Kopnina, 2014a):

I returned to those Karelian summer nights with my father and his physicist friends. On the shores of beautiful lakes, he played his guitar and helped friends to fix baidarkas for the next long journey to where the Northern horizon meets the Aurora Borealis, and to where science would meet the beauty of lived experience.

The second experience was when my mother and six-year-old sister left the USSR in 1989 and moved to Arizona, where our relatives lived. In Phoenix, I left home after a fight with my mother. I did not speak English too well but continued going to school. I met some other runaway teenagers. Most of them were addicted, some stole, some begged on the street and some girls were involved in prostitution. As it was not cold at night, I slept in my sleeping bag in the bushes near my school. I slept among the cacti and sweet-smelling dry grass, writing letters to a young man I met by the Mediterranean Sea, who would later (for a short time) become my husband. After school, I worked for a call centre advertising holiday retreats (my

Helen Kopnina

About the author

Helen is an environmental anthropologist at Leiden University, Leiden, and The Hague University of Applied Science, The Hague, the Netherlands.

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funny English attracted clients), then at Wendy’s, a fast food chain, and then for a hospice for dying people. It was that place of prickly pear, saguaro cactus and superstition mallows that brought me peace at night. The coyotes sang in the distance, and occasional hummingbirds fluttered over the fiery orange Arizona barrel cactus bloom, “as small as a world and as large as alone” (Cummings, 1956). It was indifferent to my loneliness, and, yet, always there, like family I had lost. After more than a year sleeping in the bush (and working strange jobs), I received a college scholarship and moved to Massachusetts.

My third experience involves my three-year-old daughter and her recovery from respiratory disease in the Sundarbans, West Bengal, India. In 2007 I taught at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, India, as part of an Erasmus Mundus exchange programme. While I was teaching, my partner and daughter were exploring the city, and, exciting as it was, they inhaled a lot of gassy fumes. After taking antibiotic cures, we left for a long weekend to the Sundarbans, a mangrove area in West Bengal. At the time, much of it was flooded. The places we saw were magical, with small trembling finger-like leaves of Sundari trees and the luxurious branches of Golpata dipping into muddy waters. These plants made me think of Rabindranath Tagore’s story about an Indian boy Balai, who could feel the beauty and the pain of this green universe (quoted in Kopnina [2013: 10]):

This boy really belonged to the age, millions of years ago, when the earth’s would-be forests cried at birth among the marshlands newly sprung from the ocean’s depth [...] The plant, vanguard of all living things on the road of time, had raised its joint hands to the sun and said, ‘I want to stay here, I want to live. I am an eternal traveler. Rain or sun, night or day, I shall keep travelling through death after death, towards the pilgrim’s goal of endless life.’ That ancient chant of the plants reverberates to this day, in the

woods and forests, hills and meadows, and the life of the mother earth declares through the leaves and branches, ‘I want to stay, I want to stay.’ The plant, speechless foster mother of life on earth, has drawn nourishment from the heavens since time immemorial to feed her progeny; has gathered the sap, the vigour, the savour of life for the earth’s immortal store; and raised to the sky the message of beleaguered life, ‘I want to stay’. Balai could hear that eternal message of life in a special way in his bloodstream.

Within a few days, my daughter fully recovered. Maybe, she felt that ‘call to life’ in her bloodstream as well. I certainly did.

First, wilderness meant being with my parents and friends, and experiencing freedom. Second, wilderness offered me refuge. Third, wilderness offered healing. Other environmentalists have had similar experiences. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841) described in *Self-Reliance* how society limits individual freedom. Perhaps wilderness began where the Garden of Eden ended and human dominion began? Walden Pond offered Henry David Thoreau (1854) his own refuge. Perhaps we all come to care about nature from an essential engagement with place, the lived experience of bonding with the land.

Having travelled around, I have also come to believe that environmentalism is *universal*, not just Western, and sometimes individual – and not culture-based. Some non-Western or indigenous activists are internationally renowned, like Wangari Muta Maathai, the Noble prize winner and the founder of the Green Belt Movement; others are less known. Some have sacrificed their lives to protect nature, like the Cambodian anti-logging activist Chut Wutty, who was killed in 2012; or like Jairo Mora Sandoval, a Costa Rican conservationist who was murdered on the beach where he was trying to protect leatherback turtles (these and other cases are described by

Shoreman–Ouimet and Kopnina [2016]). At least 185 land and environmental defenders, those who took peaceful action to protect the natural world, were killed in 2015 (Visser, 2016). The Honduran indigenous leader Berta Cáceres was killed in 2016 because of her campaign against an internationally financed hydroelectric dam. Isidro Baldenegro López, an indigenous Mexican activist campaigning against illegal logging, was shot dead in 2017 (Lakhani, 2017).

The environmental movement based on engagement with places that are loved is a truly global phenomenon transcending national, racial and gender boundaries (Kopnina, 2015). However, I have also realized that a lot of what I experienced (or that others did) was still motivated by anthropocentrism. Maathai was planting trees for the sake of her people, Chut Wutty was concerned not just about deforestation but also about his own people losing control over land, and of course my own experiences can be understood as anthropocentric, as it was about *my* freedom, refuge and healing. As a starting point, such a motivation serves its purpose, but there is another stage – the one leading from shallow to deep ecology.

Like other contemporary environmental writers (e.g. Noss and Cooperrider, 1994; Crist, 2012; Cafaro and Primack, 2014), I speak of nature or wilderness as an *intrinsic good* that is (or should be) inviolate. Simultaneously to the human sacrifices of environmentalists, millions of acres of habitat and millions of non-human inhabitants have been eradicated in the past few decades. Did they not have rights to life also? John Muir (quoted by Fox [1981: 43]) wrote about a cluster of rare white orchids: “I felt as if I were in the presence of superior beings who loved me and beckoned me to come. I sat down beside them and wept for joy.” He later interpreted this transcendent moment as a sudden awareness that the orchids had no relevance for human beings; they would have lived and died whether a human had seen them or not. And

wild nature, full of ‘free-willed’ lives, deserves to have that *right* to continued existence, without just being a ‘resource’ for humanity (Crist, 2012).

For me, like for many others, wilderness is a place of refuge, freedom and healing but also something else – something *independent* of me, but also *far greater* than me, something that may be part of me, or that I may be part of.

And this is the last story I want to relate about myself. When I was eight years old, I wrote a book, *Bor’ba za sushestvovaniye* (“The Battle for Survival”), in a series of Russian school notebooks. In many ways, my career as an environmental anthropologist is still building on that book, seeking a harmonious survival for both humanity *and* nature. Ecocentrism for me is also intertwined with animal rights, as I want to protect both entire ecosystems (of which humans are a part) and their individual inhabitants. My ecocentrism means I am still (and always will be) part of this ongoing battle. ■

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The author's book, written at the age of eight, *The Battle for Survival*.

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