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Of Mega-Malls and Soft-Shelled Turtles: Deep Ecological
Education to Counter Homogeneity

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We live in a North America where experiences of shopping malls are ubiquitous and encounters with wild, non-human animals are rare. We construct fantasy lands as "alternative worlds that give physical expression to the denial of disaster" (Shepard, 1995, p.21). The disaster is rooted in the abrogated significance of our biocentric heritage. We forget that we are animals who evolved in contextual association with other animals and plants. We ignore the 99

This essay is an attempt to compare the modern retail / entertainment experience of the mega-mall to a singular encounter with a wild animal in its native community context. It explores the differences between seeking amusement and happiness, as well as the capacity for experiencing joy. The aim is not to erect a straw person, but to be honestly reflective about our own experience. If, as educators, we advocate a deep ecology approach to learning, then we must also be prepared to practice what we preach. Our purpose is to apply *deep ecological* learning method to our own desire to learn. The paper concludes with some implications of these experiences to the implementation of effective environmental education programs. We begin from the notion that all education is environmental. In particular, the peril of succumbing to generic homogeneity and placelessness are highlighted.

Mona Lisa Smiles For The Mega-Mall

Leonardo da Vinci began a painting in 1503 that may be "the most famous work in the entire forty-thousand-year history of the visual arts" (McMullen, 1975, p. 1). Centuries later we are still enthralled by the mysterious lady that Leonardo da Vinci coaxed from a small slab of white poplar (30.3" x 20.9") with his miraculous palette of colours - the *Mona Lisa* (or *La Gioconda*). In particular, we are vexed by her enigmatic smile. Her self-satisfied demeanor and ambiguous mood have engendered nearly five hundred years of academic attempts to explain what lies behind Mona Lisa's smile. Whatever the reason, it is lost to time. The myth, beauty and singularity of the masterpiece, however, have been prime fodder for exploitation by the masters of modern marketing and advertising.

The most extreme case of "Mona Lisa Kitsch" that the authors have seen was one that we recently saw along the interstate highway outside of Minneapolis/St. Paul (see also Irvine, 1991). There, along the roadside, was a gargantuan billboard-sized Mona smiling at the summer traffic. The difference in this mega-Mona was in her famous smile. It was not the shy, speculative grin of daVinci's original, but a beaming countenance with the dental display of a super-model. Beneath the Cheshire grinning Mona was the explanation: "She's Been to the Mall of America." The timelessness of the masterpiece had been abrogated in favor of the modern myth of consumerism. The message was clear and simple. Happiness is sold at the mega-mall; "a place simultaneously iconic and totemic, a revered symbol of the United States and a Mecca to which the faithful would flock in pursuit of all things purchasable" (Guterson, 1993, p.51). The details of this modern mythology and its ramifications require some explication.

Happy For A While At Mall Of America

The *Mall of America* was completed in 1992 and attracted nearly 40 million visitors during its first year of operation, making it the Midwest's most popular tourist destination. The mall boasts bigness: 140,00 hot dogs sold each week, 10,000 permanent jobs, 44 escalators, 17 elevators, 12,750 parking spaces, 13,300 short tons of steel, \$1 million in cash disbursed weekly from 8 automatic teller machines, 4.2 million square feet of floor space and more than 400 purveyors of merchandise, food and entertainment (Ibid., p. 49). "Its centrepiece, Knott's Camp Snoopy, is a \$70 million family theme park in a lushly landscaped, park-like environment ... devoted to family fun" (Almquist, 1995, p. 91-92). While visiting the mall you can play 18 holes of golf on the "side of a mountain" or dine in *Planet Hollywood*, or the new *Rainforest Cafe* (complete with live animals, fog and a star-filled sky). And, you can do all of this without ever visiting the Twin Cities or the surrounding area. You can get complimentary limo service

to your hotel and to the mall, all conveniently located near the airport. We hold the dubious distinction of previous experience with such phenomena as we originally hail from the home of the larger and earlier *West Edmonton Mall*, conceived and built by the same developers. There are visitors to Edmonton who literally see nothing of the city except the inside of the airport and the mall. This mega-mall phenomenon (which is by no means limited to Edmonton and Minneapolis) is firmly planted in our modern pursuit of happiness.

In his essay "The Inflatable Plastic Moose-Head," Stuart Walker (1994) explores the connections between consumerism, happiness, and the environment. He points to a distinction between the classical notion of happiness and temporal psychological states such as pleasure, fulfilment and contentment. To be "happy for a while", says Walker, describes a feeling of pleasure or a temporary state of contentment, but not happiness. Following a review of major philosophical and religious views of happiness, Walker concludes that happiness is less an ephemeral psychological state and more of an ethical state. It is "an end, an outcome, not a means, because it is the summa of a morally good life led" (p. 87). This is the antithesis of seeking temporary satisfaction through the accumulation of material goods. In fact, Walker states that above a certain limit, the relationship between consumption of goods and happiness is inversely proportional. In the words of Joseph Wood Krutch (1970),

now as never before nearly everybody can have rather too much of many things not worth having. Deprivation can kill joy, but so, almost as certainly, can superfluity, for though we always want more, the limiting factor is ultimately what we can take in. More toys than he (sic) can play with are a burden, not a blessing, to any child be he five or fifty. (p. 68)

Nevertheless, the confusion between "happy for awhile" and happiness remains a malaise of our age and one that the mega-malls have translated into a booming cultural pursuit.

These malls also offer a social environment where people can come together, presumably to enjoy the company of other people. As with the hollowness of temporary contentment however, these malls fail to meet our basic needs for association.

The mall exploits our acquisitive instincts without honoring our communal requirements, our eternal desire for discourse and intimacy, needs that until the twentieth century were traditionally met in our marketplaces but that are not met at all in giant shopping malls.... At the Mall of America - an extreme example - we discover ourselves thoroughly lost among strangers in a marketplace intentionally designed to serve no community needs. (Guterson, 1993, pp. 50-51)

Perhaps nowhere else is it possible to experience such profound loneliness amidst so many people.

Camp Snoopy, Plastic Trees And The Need For Place-Based Heterogeneity

So why the immense popularity of the mega-mall? Does this popularity lie in some attribute of uniqueness? Research on the mega-mall phenomenon suggests that if these malls can be described as unique this attribute lies not in the shops and service units nor in the recreational components. Indeed, these represent ideas imported from other venues. The uniqueness of Mall of America and West Edmonton Mall instead lies "in the *magnitude* and *variety* of the recreational facilities, in *juxtaposition with* shops, which no other mall can claim" (Jackson and Johnson, 1991, p. 228). There remains, however, a "striking sameness" in the retail structure of these mega-malls - "a high degree of structural homogeneity, creating the potential for an erosion of consumer sovereignty" (Jones, 1991, p. 241).

This structural or generic homogeneity reveals itself to mega-mall patrons in that each one "feels the same, it looks the same, and it markets the same assortment of goods and services in the same shops" (Ibid., p. 241). The malls are "so thoroughly divorced from the communities in which they sit that they will appear to rest like permanently docked space-ships against the landscape, windowless and turned in upon their own affairs" (Guterson, p.56). Moreover, it is all made by us. It is us. The artificial sameness of it makes it akin to living in a mirrored room - all that is there is us (see Livingston, 1994).

To a certain extent the mall developers have recognized this and have made an attempt to bring the outside inside, to bring nature (and other cultures) into the mall. In their attempt to "project a separate and distinct reality in which the 'outdoor cafe' is not outdoors, a 'bubbling brook' is a concrete watercourse, and a 'serpentine street' is a hallway" (Guterson, 1993, p. 55) the mall developers play to the human need for heterogeneity. "Drawing from the world over, mall developers have converted real places into decor and motif, mixing and matching as if the Earth were a giant Lego set or salad bar" (Price, 1995, p. 192). Mall of America's Knott's Camp Snoopy, "inspired by Minnesota's natural habitat," was intended to alleviate claustrophobia and sensory deprivation. However, the mall's constant temperature of seventy degrees meant that few plants native to Minnesota could actually be utilized. Instead, the mall imported 526 tons of non-native plants including tropical rhododendrons, willow figs, orange jasmine, black olive, oleander, hibiscus, Buddhist pines and azaleas. Not only are these species entirely out of their home place, they are also entirely out of their community and evolutionary context. They stand as representations, stripped of any kind of historic continuity or future.

A recognition of the deprivatory sensory -psychological experience these simulacra incur, may be particularly instructive to environmental educators. The Minnesota forest is about relationships between native plant and animal species (including humans), daily and seasonal changes in temperature and light, variations in slope, aspect, soils, and hydrologic cycles. It is as much about rivers and creeks and the native aquatic life therein, as it is about cool evening breezes, thunderstorms, fires, insect infestations and clouds moving across the sky. It is not about rhododendrons, azaleas, oranges, constant 70 degrees fahrenheit, vermiculite, and a glass roof. The same schemers that would place Mona Lisa along the I-35, would boast of creating the Minnesota forest indoors. The mega-mall masterminds may have begun to recognize a human need for heterogeneity, but have failed to appreciate that this need is rooted in "place". The mega mall is the arrogance of this facade, a paper-thin illusion that may indeed keep some, like Mona, "happy for a while". To experience joy and the cultivation of happiness we might *again* turn our attention from the mall, and explore like the authors the forested banks of a Minnesota river.

Basking In Turtleness

Not many miles from the *Mall of America*, the St. Croix River mingles with the Mississippi to continue its glide to the Gulf. Here, along the Minnesota shore, we encountered a being, a subject, that allowed for an experience infinitely more rich than the "retail therapy" offered by that grand edifice to consumerism which so pleased Leonardo's Mona. What makes this experience especially demonstrative for our purposes is that it includes no charismatic mega-fauna nor shockingly dramatic events. We witnessed no devouring of prey by a "cunning carnivore," no narrow escape of an "innocent furry critter" from the jaws of death, and no grand sexual display by a testosterone-empowered buck. In sum, what we experienced would end up on the cutting room floor in the making of a nature documentary. What we encountered was a pair of smooth soft-shell turtles basking on a half-sunken butternut log.

The big turtles shone like dinner plates in the late morning sun. The vision of wet leathery backs and snorkel-snouts froze us in our tracks. Moments before, we had been engaged in the relaxing chat of a sylvan stroll, but the sight of the turtles cast us into careful whispers and singular focus. Our hearts leapt because we were in the presence of beings entirely new to our experience. The little we knew of softshells was from brief encounters with their spiny cousins of Lake Erie and a vague bookish knowledge acquired and half-forgotten. We knew enough, however, to realize the great fortune in gaining a glimpse of these elusive and relatively shy denizens of the Mississippi drainage. This knowledge, however, was supplanted by the recognition that our focus of attention was being reciprocated and for a brief moment all the world was bound up in the nexus of an interspecific gaze. This was a moment of incandescent particularity

that lies at the root of peak experience for a naturalist. It was of the enchanting quality that allures the poet to the same measure that it eludes the scientist. And, like all such experiences, it was shattered at the first hint of cognition. We cannot recall who moved first, but the result was two wet spots on a log that once beheld turtles. When the St. Croix swallowed them to their benthic domain, we were made unmistakably aware of our terrestrial limitations.

The smooth soft-shell turtles literally were the river. It would be futile, facile and arrogant to demarcate where they ended and the water began. Everything about them bespoke their utter dedication to turtleness. Their individuality and perfection rang with an indifference to our human presence in their world. We watched with unbridled wonder for we recognized something we did not make, could not fully understand and acknowledged as containing something greater than ourselves (Midgley, 1989, p. 41). Their kind had been here nearly as long as the river itself. Since at least the middle of the Cretaceous, soft-shelled turtles have paddled, snorkelled and basked as part of these riverine environs.

Soft-shelled turtles have pancake-flattened carapaces, broadly-webbed feet and remarkable respiratory adaptations that make them the most aquatic of all non-marine turtles. They can remain submerged for long periods (several days!) due to their ability to extract oxygen from the water using the gill-like function of pouches in the throat and near the anus of the turtle (pharyngeal and cloacal respiration). (Carr 1952, p. 412) In addition, their nostrils are placed on the end of a long snout that can be extended to break the plane of shallow waters as the turtle remains cryptically buried in the river bottom. The nostril ends are light coloured and the shape resembles a small broken twig protruding from the water. A carapace the color of river sand and mud effects a chameleon-like disappearance as the turtle rests on the bottom. To suggest that the animal is "at home" in the water is as shallow as its favorite haunts; the soft-shell turtle *is* its home. It is the Mississippi incarnate. To encounter the animal in the river is to know this.

Meeting the soft-shelled turtles in their brief period of ultraviolet absorption reinforced the notion that such encounters are wholly contextual. Neil Evernden (1985) warns of the perils in mistaking a "skin encapsulated object" for the true being of an animal:

[A]n animal is not just genes. It is an interaction of genetic potential with environment and with conspecifics. A solitary gorilla [or soft-shelled turtle] in a zoo is not really a gorilla; it is a gorilla-shaped imitation of a social being which can only develop fully in a society of kindred beings. And that society in turn is only itself when it is in its environmental context, and so on. (p. 13)

The experience of a wild animal in its own world is more about meeting a set of relationships than it is about an individual. Soft-shell turtles are only part

carapace and webbed feet; they are much more water, cat-tails and Mississippi mud. Furthermore, the experience of such a set of relationships occurs within the context of our own fields of experience. The turtles were part of the amalgam that was our morning on the trail in the humid heat of a Minnesota summer blended with the history of our collective experiences. The experience lives with us now "not a splintered fact, but a living, borderless thing, mingled with the place that made it, shaped by [our] own senses and thought" (Nelson, 1989).

Educational Implications

This paper began with a reference to the success and brilliance of Leonardo da Vinci. His biographer (Clark, 1959) explains that this "disciple of experience" (p. 160) was greatly influenced by his naturalist experiences and particularly his childhood contact with wild nature. We know that Leonardo was born and raised in the countryside and that "watching the lizards and glow worms and other strange small creatures which haunt an Italian vineyard ... color[ed] the boy's imagination and [gave] him his enduring preoccupation with organic life." (Clark, 1959, p. 18) Leonardo's childhood prepared his imagination and as a young man he

plunged, then, into the study of nature. And in doing this he followed the manner of the older students; he brooded over the hidden virtues of plants and crystals, the lines traced by the stars as they moved in the sky, over the correspondences which exist between the different orders of living things, through which, to eyes opened, they interpret each other, and for years he seemed to those about him as one listening to a voice, silent for other men. (Pater, 1980, p. 81)

His creativity and genius in later life was firmly rooted in the sense of wonder nurtured by his daily contact with the natural world.

Edith Cobb's (1977) research on the incidence and development of genius echoes a similar trend for many of history's most creative people. But first-hand nature is not only a need for exceptional folk, it is a requirement critical to proper human ontogeny "as hard and unavoidable as the compounds of our inner chemistry." (Shepard, 1983, p. 54; see also Shepard, 1982) Furthermore, there is growing evidence that such experience is the single most important factor in the development of a personal concern for the environment. (Palmer, 1993; Tanner, 1980) Our future, all of us who dwell on this blue planet, depends on nurturing these formative experiences.

The other lesson that we can learn from our contact with Leonardo da Vinci is the difference between recognition and appreciation. There is little doubt

that most people beyond grade school level are "aware" of the *Mona Lisa* and could probably identify the artist. The commercial exploitation of this masterpiece, however, points to a marked "depreciation." (Irvine, 1991) That we exploit the natural world through the "nature porn" of wildlife calendars, coffee table books and posters is not an unlike comparison. We are "aware" of endangered species, mountain splendor and ocean sunsets, but these images do little to engender "appreciation" in the absence of direct personal contact. Likewise, environmental education programs that emphasize the memorization of images, names and facts may very well increase the "recognition" of other beings with whom we share the planet, but the absence of experiential learning negates any real sense of appreciation. If, as the authors of this paper believe, a primary goal of environmental education programs should be to promote a deep-rooted appreciation (leading to lifetime engagement), then a deep ecological approach is crucial from the earliest days of childhood.

Meaningful and effective environmental education is the antithesis of homogeneity. Programs should strive to highlight diversity through a recognition of context or place. Scripted and published programs may offer some excellent ideas for development of curricula, but that material *must* be contextualized for the local environment. Educators might begin by asking the question: "What are the biota and communities that characterize this place?" For if we are trying to cultivate a sense of place in students or participants, it behooves us to understand that place to begin with. Place "entails a sense of belonging, an understanding of relationships ... where one's life makes sense, place is home." (Russell, 1994, 18; see also Orr, 1992)

Once a local context has been clearly established as an initial step to a deep ecological approach, then the capacity for personal discovery must be designed into every environmental education program. On the same trip that we had the opportunity for discovery of softshell turtles, we watched two young boys playing at the mouth of a small river. The river cut through a long sandbar where the two rolled and splashed in the cooling waters. There was nobody else in sight and they did not know that we were watching them. They were entirely emersed, physically and emotionally, in their surroundings. This type of discovery through play reaches far beyond anything we can do solely in the class room. "Play is not merely the child's way of learning, it is the only good and lasting way of learning for the young child." (Piers & Landau, 1980, p. 16) Furthermore, we suspect that these boys were beginning to cultivate a relationship with their world; one that was already maturing beyond the simplicity of ownership. For, as Nabhan and Trimble (1994, p.23) explain: "Eventually, the discovery suffices for power; observation serves as possession; and we leave these objects where we find them, transcending the old dead-end of human domination over nature." Such a maturation cannot advance beyond infantile if experience is limited to mega-malls where the very *raison d'etre* is possession.

Finally, we have to recognize that the participants of our outdoor environmental education programs will likely have been weaned on mega-malls. By providing them with an environment conducive to organically meaningful experience, reflection and practice, perhaps we can counter the consumeristic tendencies. Perhaps we and they can learn to be more than "happy for awhile" with new trinkets and discover the joy inherent in the biota with whom we share this planet. This notion is stated eloquently by Joseph Wood Krutch (1970) and seems a fitting ending to our discussion:

Those who have never found either joy or solace in nature might begin by looking not for the *joy they can get*, but for the *joy that is there* amid those portions of the earth [humans have] not yet entirely pre-empted for [their] own use. And perhaps when they have become aware of joy in other creatures they will achieve joy themselves, by sharing in it. (p. 248)

Notes

1. A fascinating adjunct to this phenomenon is the appearance of stores within the mega-malls that are in the booming business of selling "nature". The *Nature Company* for example, posted net sales of \$162 million in 1993. This is a logical extension of the discussion within this paper, but is beyond our scope, see Price (1995) for further details.

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