

Trumpeter (1996)
ISSN: 0832-6193
Thoughts on the Idea of Adventure

Bob Henderson
McMasters University

BOB HENDERSON is a faculty member of the Department of Kinesiology, at McMasters University, 1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, ON L8S 4K1.

Adventure-based learning seeks self-growth through challenging experiences that heighten relationships and promote greater self competencies and self awareness. Unfortunately, this broad notion of adventure learning as challenge, risk, uncertainty, change, can all too simply be funnelled down to a conquest of self "over" obstacle as a means to greater self-concept. In outdoor pursuits and adventure travel, the obstacle is Nature. This staging of Nature as obstacle/opponent is proving to be all too common in the educational domain and personal experiences where underlying cultural assumptions and practices encourage detachment from environment.

However, this blind conquest of nature for gains in self-aggrandizement and character skills is an adventure orientation that ultimately is detrimental to self and counter to a slowly emerging cultural realization that we must forge for a naturally beneficial reconciliation with nature.

Culturally, we are learning that our collective conscious must seek an ecological frame of reference that is fundamentally *with* nature, not *against* nature. In the end, we must discover, as Theodore Roszak has said, "that the needs of the person are the needs of the planet." This is a clear expression of "with".

Typically, there is the individual versus (read: "against") Nature idea, that so readily fits our cultural domain. Here we cover ground, take on rapids, peaks, great distance often in competitive efficient high-tech teams. As the sense of self is enlarged to the excitement of the challenge arena itself, the self more and more seeks "to know" the rock, rapid, landscape in a subjective depth of identity. The Self seeks beyond itself and, ultimately, out of this advances a third stage of adventure maturity which is to be "with" rock, rapid, landscape.

The self can be freed as an extending of one's center into one's environment through direct experience, a direct meeting, face to face. We experience vitality in the sense that we are as a sponge, that we are in context to surroundings we experience directly, not mediated through a cultural context that fundamentally breeds individualism, consumption and objectivity. We experience integrity in that we are aware of a possible integration to place. Both of these qualities bring a healthiness, or even holiness to our vital Self. This is indeed a state of adventure.

While on a dog sledding trip in Northern Manitoba's "land of the little sticks", I was hoping to capture the timeless ways and enduring patterns of life of this quiet part of the North. One hears so often about "...the ways of the North". I continually seek my personal, albeit romantic, sensibility for this way. This particular North I seek seems to me to have maintained its authenticity through

time. It was a cultural fit and some vague notion of biological fit with this landscape I was after. I would chat with Chipewyan trappers. I would mush dogs for hours and blend into another time, and to the place itself direct, to meet the territory, not some cultural mapping/image of landscape.

I do not wish to totally dismiss the popular but narrow idea of adventure of the physical. But, as a result of a rather disheartening experience with a journalist about my notion of adventure in Northern Manitoba, I am prompted to suggest further possibilities: possibilities that advance adventure education and one's personal travels to links with place as a central question of self-growth, possibilities that were obscured in this interview.

The adventure of spirit is easily denied and marginalized to the convention. Such adventure is denied of writers and educators of adventure who might spark such reflexivity. I have been told more than once by editors: "a well written trip report but not 'epic' enough," "you have not covered enough ground [physical ground]," "there is little hardship expressed," "where is the heightened perceived risk?" I have seen editors of adventure travel magazines cut out the more reflexive "one with nature" sentiments to insidiously reinforce other comments of hardship and death-defying moments that may or may not exist in the text.

One easily becomes trapped in interview to discuss hardship and physical fitness, distance covered and the accomplishments simply because these are the questions asked. While all the above might be down-played by the interviewee, it is still reported in such a way that its presence dominates.

So it was with a comic sense of disappointment that I found my dog sledding experience described in the frustratingly familiar limited context of adventure as "hardship", where one "lives to tell the tale" and, of course, "roughs it". I was struck with a realization that my attempts to communicate the adventure quest that is a "with" nature orientation and a living history ambience had actually reinforced that which I consciously did not wish to communicate. That is, the against nature phenomena so annoyingly common to adventure travel journalism could so easily be overlaid on my own profoundly different orientation.

The writer was simply doing her job of writing a cute adventure piece to be consumed by the armchair traveller and to reinforce the convention of adventure travel writing. Should I have expected her to want to challenge the readers with the notion of "blood racing" that I was attempting to convey to her? The magazine and journalist know their readership. Or do they? There is little challenge offered the reader. This perpetuates a simplistic, shallow, and detrimental context for human engagement with bush travel. Rather than the subtle and humble fit with environment achievable through a felt experience and a sensuous knowing of a place stripped of cultural mapping, my quiet quest became framed within the man over nature, conquering self-aggrandizement, perhaps even a consumer orientation of humans' options for engagement with nature. This bagging of another peak, river, or historic route exists as a trophy

to be scratched from the shopping list. This is another type of engagement altogether.

Consider how "physical hardship", as conveyed in the interview, is an example of misrepresentation. It was a total joy to be out on the land, in a more aimless orientation. We were simply travelling around in caribou country, coming to know the place rather than covering ground. At the time, any hardship amounted only to our growing frustration with the number of fresh caribou tracks, yet no sighting of caribou. We all wanted simply to see caribou in winter. When we did see caribou it was more a matter-of-factness than a conquest that we felt. The North simply is and it simply asks the same of us. That is simply, to be! Physical hardship did not play a part in any major concern on this trip. Hardship is Toronto, Chicago, Denver rush hour traffic and getting familiar again to stifling hot indoor temperatures upon return.

I did have one "popular" risk to physical well being. It was my first moment on the sled while it was still tied to a small standing spruce. I was to keep up the rear. I watched the two other teams release their anchoring slip knot and head down the trail with wildly excited dogs expressing their relief to be on the trail again, free from their pent-up state in a dog box. (I'm sure we could all empathize with the dogs.) My anchor line and the tree itself were straining with all this excitement. Finally with the right spacing of teams, I yanked, but only tightened my apparent slip knot. Oh, an adventure, I thought. The dogs went into hysterics. They knew what was supposed to have happened. The tree now bent with new found energy. Native town kids, who had gathered to see us off, laughed hysterically. The other teams were long gone. Seconds passed. I had to be calm and quick. This wasn't easy. I was testing many personal powers.

I was left with one option, to fidget with frantic line and knot with one hand while holding on to the sled with the other. Once freed the sled would fly out like a bull in a rodeo. This was normal, but the extra frustration I had unwittingly caused the dogs I knew would be felt. If I could only free this knot. There was a risk of injuring my hand in all this. My pride was long gone.

I was rational but comically in a panic when the dogs and my fidgeting worked together. We were all free. I had held on. The tree had not fared as well. I had survived an adventure.

There are questions of great relevance for adventure education. They are: How does the adventure educator teach a pedagogy that is to be "with" landscape? How can our being adventurous be advanced into a relational and ecological context of being? I think that it is best not to dwell on thoughts and deeds of physical hardship, distance covered, roughing it, "living to tell the tale" and physical fitness. This all seems sadly egotistical with emphasis on a hostile environment, where humanity has no place and "place", the territory, is not perceived as primary. Our challenge, in the closing years of twentieth century adventure education is to develop an ecological relationship to nature concerned

with the adventure of the spirit.

Citation Format

Henderson, Bob (1996) *Thoughts on the Idea of Adventure Trumpeter*: 13, 2.
<http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.13.2.4>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details