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*LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land*

**Walking as bodily readying for engagement with natural  
Environments**

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**Abstract**

Trends to an increase in mediated experiences of nature will create greater distance between humans and nature. This is likely to diminish human commitment to protect natural environments, at a time when we should be improving protection.

Researchers increasingly emphasise the importance of finding new ways of connecting with natural environments that may lead to better human stewardship and protection behaviors. This paper explores underresearched relationships between walking in natural environments and enhanced affiliation with and commitment to protect natural environments. The paper draws on analyses from several disciplines to speculate about this relationship. Among accounts of many types of walking, the interactions between walking, walker and environment are most directly described by Wunderlich's (2008) concept of 'discursive' walking, and Lee and Ingold's (2006) 'embodied experience'. These concepts focus on the bodily experience of walking, where walker consciously and unconsciously engages and interacts with discernible and indiscernible features of the places through which they walk. The interaction is much more than contemplation led by the eyes. Multiple senses are alert, and the feet play an important sensory role. Walking is described as a co-creation, a discourse between internal bodily rhythms and the rhythms and features of place. The paper suggests that in some circumstances walking may help people develop affinity with place, and that in some circumstances people will be acted on through walking and readied for personal change, which may be an enhanced engagement with natural environments more generally. The issues are sufficiently important, and the analysis sufficiently positive, to warrant further exploration of links between walking and connection with nature.

## Introduction

In a keynote presentation at the Land Dialogues conference in April 2015, the Senior Curator of People and the Environment at the National Museum of Australia said that his overarching aim for the museum is to advance people's sense of oneness with the environment (Oakman, 2016). Cooke et al (2016) describe a similar holism associated with caring for the environment. This holistic connection requires a breakdown of divisions, boundaries and barriers between humans and nature, and draws attention to the role of the body in our practices and thinking (Cooke, West and Boonstra, 2016).

'This embodied connection positions people as tangible inhabitants of a biosphere that they are actively co-producing as part of a multi-species assemblage' (Cooke et al., 2016, 3).

If our world is to remain habitable it needs larger numbers of humans to place the protection of the environment as a higher priority in their voting and everyday behaviours. Climate change science and social marketing techniques have raised awareness of environmental problems, but resulting policy and behaviour changes often lack the scale and commitment required (Kahan, 2013). Further, focus on upscaling pro-environmental behavior has often relied on mental connections and engagement (mind-shift) that may in fact perpetuate attitudinal separation of human and ecological, where it is more important that they be reconnected (Cooke et al, 2016). It has been suggested that human knowledge and capacity to impact nature has to date mostly given rise to unsustainable practices of impact, and that we should consider new ways of connecting and knowing about nature if we are to 'learn and teach about sustainability' (Cato & Myers, 2011, 56). But as activists and authorities often struggle to engage populations with protection of the environment in sustained ways, human activity is increasingly urban and estranged from natural environments (Tyler, 2015).

This paper examines the potential for one way of knowing about the natural environment that is social and bodily and available to most humans, walking. In

particular, this paper examines the notion that walking in natural environments can influence a walker's relationship with natural environments. It considers the bodily and other processes that may be involved in such a change, and the nature of the relationship with environment.

We need mental engagement with environment that delivers strategy and problem-solving and global perspective, but sole focus on the mental and the global is not enough. The desire to protect environments may come more readily with close experience and attachment. Ingold (2000) said 'the local is not a more limited or narrowly focused apprehension than the global, it is one that rests on an altogether different *mode* of apprehension – one based on an active, perceptual engagement with components of the dwelt-in world, in the practical business of life, rather than on the detached, disinterested observation of a world apart' (Ingold, 2000, 40). Ingold goes on to say that the global perspective is indifferent to place and context, while the local experiential perspective is deeply engaged.

It is argued here that walking as bodily experience may enhance our engagement with land, locale and nature in ways that lead to a greater desire to protect. In particular it explores possible links between bodily experiences of walking and social / attitudinal connection with or sense of attachment to the environment. I'm hoping not to be overly positivist in hypothesising about what arises from walking, and distance hiking in particular, but I suggest that under some circumstances the influence may be profound, and that this deserves further exploration. A strong case can be made for encouraging children to directly and physically experience natural environments. This paper is intended for all, but is written in the main with adults in mind.

The first section discusses concepts of walking, and poses questions about what occurs unconsciously and bodily through walking to connect us – socially and affectively - with the places in which we walk, and the notion that walking may enhance readiness for what can be called stewardship of place (Cato & Myers, 2011). The next section questions the influence of mediated experiences of nature,

and focuses more directly on walking as an unmediated, physical experience of environment. It presents Wunderlich's (2008) account of walking and urban places, and accounts of walking as multisensory interaction of internal and spatial rhythms. It then presents 6 types of walking, focusing on two types, Wunderlich's (2008) discursive walking, and Lee and Ingold's (2006, 72) 'embodied experience', as accounts for enhanced familiarity with and adaptation to the natural while walking.

### **Beyond destination - (Re)discovering walking**

For most people, walking is an everyday act done largely unconsciously and very much taken for granted. Some take an 'aristocratic stroll' (Solnit, 2001, 153) others have no choice but to endure a pedestrian labour. Walking is a means of transport and movement, a way to pass time, a mode of exercise, and for many a means to emotional calming or psychological escape. Walking is often linked to the environment and sustainability because it is a sustainable alternative to energy intensive forms of transport (Afsar et al, 2015), however there is little research connecting walking with environmentalism, or walking with acquiring greater commitment to protecting natural environments. Artists, philosophers, and researchers from anthropology, sociology, civic planning, public health, exercise and natural sciences have carefully examined different dimensions, features, frequencies and experiences of walking. This section reviews some of the ways that writers and researchers have discussed walking.

Walking is generally considered very positively for its benefits to mental and physical health and there has been considerable study of the features of urban environments such as safety, aesthetics and access that encourage and deter people from walking (Makki et al, 2012). Destination type, distance, population density and route variables such as pavement length and block size have been found to predict levels of urban walking (Lee & Moudon, 2006). Urban designers have tended to focus on utilitarian concerns associated with walking such as size, effort required, access, safety and directness of path. There has been much less attention given to varying the experience of walking, or helping people to engage, encounter and enjoy place (Wunderlich, 2008, 137). Some research suggests mental

health benefits of walking are pronounced in green spaces (Barton, Hine & Pretty, 2009) however there is little research on the impact of repeated exposure to the natural environment (Brown et al, 2014).

Societies use and view walking differently at different times. Historical walks, art walks and various tours today use walking to enable closer engagement with a particular aspect of culture. Some walking has been conceptualised as performance, a deliberate means to exploring self and using space/place to stimulate dialogue.

'Walking offers the individual-who-walks the opportunity to exercise and develop a number of skills, integrating the mind, the body and physical space (environment) into a dynamic unit ... Rather than seeing walking as a spatial practice, I see it as a subjective, environmental and unfolding practice or as a performance of self in spatio-temporal terms' (Sotelo, 2010, 61).

Sotelo (2010) organized a walk for a day where Ecuadoran Indigenous peoples in the past had been forced to be slaves, as a way of starting cross cultural dialogue. The unconscious was valued and acknowledged, and cultural and historic insights were sought. For this walking the destination was irrelevant compared to the act of the journey.

People in many western countries are finding new purposes and reasons for walking. For example the *Girltrek* movement in the United States is using walking as a focus to bring women together for a range of individual and collective benefits. Located in 17 states, *Girltrek* is aiming for a million members:

'It's more than a walk! It's a health revival. A stress protest. A community resurrection. An opportunity to meet a new friend, work up a sweat, and have someone cheer you on. Come out to a trek near you!' (<http://www.girltrek.org/>).

Since the 1980s there has been a large increase in the number of people, mostly from western countries, who choose a long and often arduous pilgrim walk known as

the *Camino* to the city of Santiago in Spain. Hundreds of thousands walk hundreds of kilometres annually for a range of religious and cultural reasons (Pilgrim's Office, 2016), although for many the reason is not religious at all (Egan 2010). In 'Walking back to happiness', Egan (2010) explains the Camino as multisensory, experiential, bodily, intrapersonal, and spiritual, but also profoundly shared and social. Largely because of its trials, the Camino walk is understood as an experience leading to insight and personal transformation. Most would agree that 'the goal is the way itself', not reaching Santiago. According to Egan: 'In the past, people found God on the route: these days they are more likely to find nature or themselves' (2010, 115). After hiking more than 3200 kilometres on the Appalachian Trail in the USA Bahnson (2015) wrote a thesis about personal learning and change among hikers. He reported that long distance hikers commonly experienced enhanced feelings of altruism, minimalism, patriotism and environmentalism. More research is needed to assess feelings and changes that endure, and the features of nature hiking experiences – the parsimony of rucksack life, immersion in less and untamed environments, camaraderie or solitude, removal from the everyday, walking - that may be most influential.

### **Walking as physical, unmediated experience of the environment**

It is often lamented that experience of the natural world in childhood and beyond has been diminished in modern times. Living in concrete cityscapes, our experiences of natural environments are increasingly mediated in various ways. Cato and Meyers (2010) regret that even environmental science curriculum relies overly on understanding through mediated and other transmission of information and thinking, underutilising understanding and 'knowledge as a process acquired through practice (experiential learning)' (52). They ask '...how might knowledge conveyed through an abstract system of writing differ from knowledge derived through a community of song, as is the case with the Aboriginal songlines?' (53). They suggest that knowledge of the world acquired through writing may 'have impaired our ability to directly experience it, and hence to feel an affinity which may be the precursor to a sustainable stewardship approach' (Cato & Myers, 2011). Further, the quality of the language we use has been diminished as a means to describing the natural

environment in detail. Tyler (2015) speculates that as we become less familiar with natural environments we lose the need for precise vocabulary to describe and explain complex ecosystems. When we use general terms such as 'greenfield site' and even 'countryside', the natural becomes estranged, more to be feared or controlled than protected. 'The more you simplify and homogenise the system the more susceptible to attack it becomes' (Tyler, 2015, 4). Experiences of nature are increasingly mediated by language, and our language is becoming less oriented to dealing with the complexity of environment.

'Walking connects us to earth; walking is a persistent characteristic of the human' (Jacks, 2002, 7). Across many generations walking has helped to connect humans with nature, but how might this work? What occurs to, for, and within us in relation to our surrounds when we walk? We know that walking is a practical and physical activity in which heart rate quickens, body temperature rises and other bodily changes occur (Sotelo, 2010). Yet there remain important and fundamental gaps concerning what occurs in and from the act of walking in relation to where we walk. For example, attempts at training navigation and orientation skills in laboratories using virtual reality techniques show that when people walk physically in the world they orient to their walking environment in ways that are superior to virtual training, in bodily and sensory ways that they are not aware of, and are difficult to replicate (Ruddle 2013). There is a gap between the skill acquired or knowledge that occurs when we walk, and the learning that can be simulated with virtual training technology. This gap is perhaps closely related to the concept focus of this paper.

Researchers who have explored bodily connection with place or environment have described various concepts and different levels of consciousness and deliberation in perception of, or interaction with, environment. The slow pace of walking or strolling has been associated with greater opportunity to contemplate and focus on the detail of countryside and nature, an experience which is often less available in modern times of urban living and vehicular transport (Lee and Ingold, 2006). Think for a moment about a tree flashing past as seen through a car window. Now consider a tree growing ever taller and vivid as it is approached on foot, a complex of colour,

shade and branches viewed first from one side, then merging with an evolving view, and yet another if one turns back to regard the tree just passed.

But this connection with place is more than deliberate contemplation of what we see, walking itself helps us to experience and know most directly the environment we are in. Step after step we push our feet out ahead, necessitating 'contact with the ground and, often, a state of being attuned to the environment' (Lee and Ingold, 2006, 68). We tend not to associate the foot with expression and perception, but non-western societies commonly refer to 'footfall as knowledge', an idea that knowledge comes not just when walking, but through the act of walking, 'it is itself the means of knowing' (Macfarlane, 2012, 27). Cato and Myers (2011) refer to slow, reciprocal absorption of body and environment, with perceptions as part of experience 'suggesting active engagement, creation and recreation (emergence) of self in relation with others (objects and people) and our environment (our 'situated' and 'social' learning)' (55). They give examples of a rural English town encouraging slow meditative walk, or walking with eyes closed to deepen community bonds and 'learn a new reality in relationship with nature', and Indigenous Australian performative interpretation of surrounds through songs and symbols (63). There is a body of research related to storing of knowledge in societies without contact with writing, such as the role Aboriginal songlines have played in aiding memory of hundreds of details about plants. Nungarrayi (in Kelly, 2015) explains walking and singing through country as a mnemonic, '.. the country tells you and you tell the country. Every rock and undulation and your position in space and time creates your part in the story and your connection with the Dreaming' (in Kelly, 2015, xv). These links between the physical experience of walking and place and enduring connection or 'knowledge' are similar to the central concepts of interest to this paper.

Walking is an experience that stimulates multiple senses, as we walk we hear the sound of birds or wind, smell the damp in a forest, see wide vistas and picturesque hills, touch the cool air, and even taste fruits and nuts along our way. The senses interact and complement (Rodaway, 2002) but the inter-relationship of the senses is not well understood. Wunderlich (2008) examines various dimensions of the sense

of touch involved in walking – reaching, general sense of being, moving, imagined - and collects associations and ideas that various scholars have used to help articulate walking as experience. She connects the bodily with the social in several ways. She says that constantly touching the ground we participate in our spatial environment in a way that generates feelings of engagement and affinity, and refers to Rodaway's (1994) belonging. As we move we generate senses of perspective on distance and size and direction. We emote as we walk, and develop attachments to place and associations with emotions:

'...perception through walking nurtures senses of place. Senses of place emerge and are sustained by bodily sensual and socially meaningful experiences originating from the perception of the environment whilst in motion... Through exercising global and reach-touch, we enhance our haptic relationship to place, and enrich this perception with multiple other sensual impressions... Sensual interaction and social impressions generated by the experience of walking nurture emotional judgement and thought for places.' (Wunderlich, 2008, 130).

Many of Wunderlich's city-focused assertions are pertinent to the discussion of more natural environments in this paper because her central concern is for understanding connections and interactions between walker, walking and space or place. The connection between walker and environment is even more direct in the countryside than in urban areas (Lee and Ingold, 2006). Footfall in the countryside leaves a print or mark or some other dislocation that is a record of passing, and on paths has an accretive effect that marks the way for others in the future. The sense of place referred to by Wunderlich (2008) is an arising or becoming or oneness that occurs through the experience of walking. The next section examines two different approaches to categorizing walking articulated by urban planner Wunderlich (2008) and ethnographers Lee and Ingold (2006). Each approach distinguishes 3 categories, and each identifies one category that emphasises the importance of unconscious interaction (synchronization, co-production) between body and place, and is suggestive of Egan's (2010) notion of the body and mind being readied or acted on by the experience of walking.

## **Six types of walking**

Walking is not always the same, so how should the experience of walking be dimensionalised? Egan (2010) referred to Camino pilgrims being acted on through walking and readied for religion or some other personal change. Cato and Myers (2010) emphasised strategies for unmediated connection with place. This section considers different types of walking and interaction with the environment, with a special interest in walking that is likely to enhance affinity with and respect for natural environments. Wunderlich (2008) distinguishes three types of walking, 'purposive', 'conceptual', and the main focus for this paper on walking and affinity with place, 'discursive walking'. Lee and Ingold (2006) described three modes of interaction with the environment they gleaned from walkers – 'looking outward' 'reflecting inward', and 'embodied experience'.

We begin with Lee and Ingold (2006). They describe 'looking around' walking in contrast to driving, where people are separated from the environment by a vehicle, and focused on the road ahead. At slow walking speeds people perceive more detail in their surrounds and turn in all directions to enjoy a wider vista. This outward focus is contrasted with an inward focus where walking is used as 'time for thinking', about anything, from the spiritual to practical problem solving to idea generation or 'emotional release' (71). They describe a third mode as 'embodied experience', connecting the body with place (72-73) and give two examples. The first example of embodied walking emphasises the body perceiving - the wind, the scents, sounds and ground underfoot. For this walker the eyes are secondary to feet, ears and skin in terms of perceiving the environment. They describe the 'co-production of a walking experience between environment and person, both of which are in flux' (72). 'The boundaries between the body and the environment are blurred by the movements of both' (72). The second example of embodied walking illustrates the importance of place, differentiating the structured constraints on walking and movement that occur inside a building, from the freedom of movement and walking outside, and 'a feeling of moving at an appropriate pace for the environment' (73). Further, the weather and other conditions act on the body to stimulate excitement, pleasure, fear or other

states. One of these three modes is likely to dominate but they can occur simultaneously or separately in the course of a single walk.

'Purposive' walking is characterised by passing from A to B (Wunderlich, 2008). With a purpose in reaching a destination people tend to maintain a steady and rapid pace through their longing to arrive. People often disengage from the bodily automaticity of the walking act by listening to music or talking on a phone. 'Conceptual' walking is thoughtful and reflective. It intends interpretation and information seeking, in the manner of thinking beforehand and planning to become acquainted with a place. Conceptual walking might be done by an urban planner, artist or landscaper with a view to gleaning insight, uncovering what often goes unnoticed (Wunderlich, 2008). Walking is more 'discursive' when 'the journey is *more* important than the destination' (Wunderlich, 2008, 132). Discursive walking is characterised by participation through half-conscious exploration, sensorial experience and engagement;

'It is discursive because its pace and rhythm are synchronized with the walker's own internal bodily rhythms (biological and psychological) whilst experiencing and swinging along with the place's own moving rhythms, and being sensitive to external paces and temporalities ...' (Wunderlich, 2008, 132).

The meeting and alignment of personal and spatial rhythms is central to the concept of discursive walking. Walkers bring their own internal rhythms which interact voluntarily or necessarily with the institutional and material rhythms of places (Edensor, 2010). According to Wunderlich (2008) people not only adjust the speed towards alignment with the speed of those walking around them, but also to 'social, spatial or natural character' and rhythms of place (134). Purposive walking is more habitual and disengaged, while conceptual walking is more consciously engaged with place. This paper is more concerned with bodily/place affinity arising from discursive walking, what occurs less consciously when we walk in a place, especially a non-urban place, and the idea that people adapt to some extent to the place through which they walk.

There are many ways to dimensionalise walking. This section has presented 6 types from two sources, and found two that are similar. They suggest both conscious and unconscious connection and co-creation arising from walker and place. The destination is not important. The experience is bodily and multisensory, the body acts and is acted upon through the journey.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has drawn from analyses of walking across several disciplines to articulate an original account of walking as a multisensory experience of immediate locale, and a coproduction between body and place. The role of the foot as sensor and perceiver has been emphasised, but so too have sensory interactions that occur unconsciously, and possibly beyond our comprehension, to date without category or label.

The context for this paper is a world where many are concerned that we need much greater commitment by humans to protecting the natural environment, and that protection may be enhanced by holistic sense of connection. This paper has explored the idea that a more holistic connection to the natural environment may be influenced by the experience of walking. The paper has associated notions of holistic attachment to ecologies and natural environments with physical, bodily experiences, as distinct from mediated experiences of nature through screen and word images. Not everyone can walk, but most are able. The paper makes no claims to aiding widespread uptake of walking, but provides a conceptual analysis suggesting that such a goal is worthwhile.

The interactions that can occur between walking, walker and environment are best captured by Wunderlich's (2008) concept of discursive walking, and Lee and Ingold's (2006) 'embodied experience'. These concepts focus on the body experience of walking, where walker engages and interacts with discernible and indiscernible features of the places through which we walk. It's much more than contemplation led

by the eyes, multiple senses are alert, and the feet play an important sensory role. Walking is described as a co-creation, a discourse between internal bodily rhythms (Wunderlich, 2008) and the rhythms of place.

The focus of this paper has been quite distinctly western, but significantly enriched by the non-western notions of the foot as sensor and perceiver, and an introduction to Aboriginal songlines. The Aboriginal experience of songlines, walking and singing through country, co-creating memories of images and actions (not words), and a detailed knowledge of the environment required for survival, is conceptually very similar to the focus of this paper. As is so often is the case, the old Aboriginal ways offer a profound and elegant insight into the needs of the day. Do people find through walking what is needed in their lives? These notions of connection and meaning may defy experimental methods but need to be explored.

Walking is necessarily local to the physical act. This paper suggests that the slow pace of walking can facilitate engagement, absorption, an absent-minded immersion in the natural environment. Walking on its own does not automatically stimulate any particular response to the locale. But as Egan (2010) suggests, in some circumstances and perhaps at some points in life, the experience of walking opens people to being acted upon, and this may be by the places in which we walk.

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