

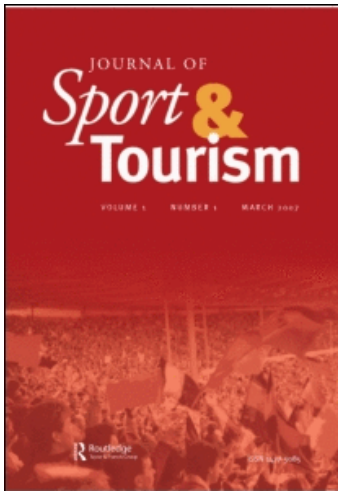
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### Extreme Sports as a Precursor to Environmental Sustainability

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# Extreme Sports as a Precursor to Environmental Sustainability

Eric Brymer, Greg Downey & Tonia Gray

*Extreme sports have unfortunately gained a reputation for being risk focused and adrenaline fuelled. This perspective has obscured the place of the natural world, making extreme athletes appear to seek to conquer, compete against or defeat natural forces. In contrast, this paper explores findings from a larger hermeneutic phenomenological study that suggests extreme sports can initiate a positive change in participants' relationships with the natural world. Data sources include first-hand accounts of extreme sports participants such as biographies, videos, papers and journals as well as interviews with ten male and five female extreme sports participants. Reports indicate that extreme sport participants develop feelings of connection to the natural world and describe themselves as being at one with the natural world or connected through a life enhancing energy. The paper draws on theoretical perspectives in ecopsychology which suggest that feeling connected to nature leads to a desire to care for the natural world and contributes to more environmentally sustainable practices.*

*Keywords:* Extreme Sports; Natural World; Merging; Natural Energy; Ecopsychology; Phenomenology

Terms such as 'whiz sports,' 'free sports,' 'adventure sports,' 'lifestyle sports,' 'alternative sports' and 'extreme sports' are often used interchangeably as if to describe the same type of activity. One potential disadvantage of this is that definitions are imprecise, for example, white-water kayaking on grade two of the universal grading system can be exciting but the results of an accident or mistake relatively innocuous. The results of an accident or mistake at grade six, on the other hand, are most likely terminal. At this level, if something goes wrong, death is a real possibility (Hunt, 1995; Slanger & Rudestam, 1997).

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In this paper we take a narrow view on extreme sports and define them as independent sports where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death (Brymer, 2009; Brymer & Oades, 2009); 'There's no choice but to realise that if you get this wrong you will be dead' (BM, female extreme mountaineer, mid 30s). Or as one extreme skier so poetically put it: 'Imagine if every time you missed a basket, somebody would shoot you in the head' (KK, female extreme skier, mid 30s).

Typical activities that fall into our definition of 'extreme sports' include B.A.S.E. (Buildings, Antennae, Space, Earth) jumping, extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, big wave surfing, high-level mountaineering and climbing without ropes or 'free solo' climbing. For example, B.A.S.E. jumping is considered to be the most extreme of the parachute sports where participants jump from solid structures such as cliffs, bridges or buildings (Celsi *et al.*, 1993; Soreide *et al.*, 2007). Whilst skydivers utilise safety devices such as warning technology and second parachute, B.A.S.E. jumpers do not have any such devices or second parachutes, in some cases because they simply will not function given B.A.S.E. conditions. B.A.S.E. jumpers leap from solid structures that might be only a few hundred feet from the ground; if something does go wrong at this height, they might hit the solid structure they jumped from long before a second parachute could deploy. B.A.S.E. jumping is arguably one of the most extreme of extreme sports with a significantly higher chance of death than other sports, even skydiving (Soreide *et al.*, 2007). As one B.A.S.E. jumper put it: 'There are no second chances' (EJ, male B.A.S.E. jumper, early 70s).

Extreme skiing typically requires skiing down sheer cliffs where a fall results in the skier tumbling out of control. Waterfall kayaking involves kayaking over structures rated at the highest grade on the international white-water grading system. The highest waterfalls, for example, are at least 30 metres tall, and again a mistake would most likely result in death (SB, male extreme kayaker, aged late 30s). Big wave surfing takes surfers into waves over 20 feet tall, where even some of the most renowned surfers have died (Warshaw, 2000).

### Extreme Sports and Tourism

Extreme sports present a special challenge to sport and tourism providers as many activities are undertaken by self-sufficient, highly mobile visitors (Higham & Hinch, 2006). For example, in early 2006, two Australians travelled from Sydney to Mount Meru, India, in the Himalayas with a film crew and a 16-member support team. The husband and wife team climbed 6672 metres, kissed each other and leapt into the abyss. They were both highly skilled B.A.S.E. jumpers wearing specially designed 'wingsuits' and set a new world record for the highest B.A.S.E. jump. This amazing feat took six years to plan and realise (Swann & Singleman, 2007).

Once a year, surfers specialising in riding big waves participate in the Mavericks Surf Contest at Half Moon Bay, California. The competition is announced only 24 hours in advance in order to ensure ideal surf conditions. Despite the short notice, surfers arrive from all over the globe. The media turnout is enormous, and helicopters and specialist

boats struggle for the best viewing spot. In 2008, the winning purse was US\$75,000 (Dearen, 2008), and organisers were expecting over 50,000 spectators (Conley, 2008). This extreme sport has tragically claimed the lives of several renowned surfers (Warshaw, 2000; Leff, 2007). Similar stories and statistics can be found for other extreme sports such as free diving, extreme skiing and waterfall kayaking.

With examples such as these, it is little wonder that the outsider's perception of extreme sports is often negatively framed: athletes are typically considered to be risk-takers or adrenaline junkies (Lambton, 2000; Baker & Simon, 2002; Pizam *et al.*, 2002; Self *et al.*, 2007). For some, the initial motive to participate might be the thrills, glamour and excitement of these activities, but these motives soon change in many cases (Celsi *et al.*, 1993). Thus, the stereotype of extreme athletes as risk-taking adrenaline junkies may be too simplistic a perspective that reflects a naïve, non-participants' anxieties as opposed to the lived experiences of participants, especially those of the most accomplished veterans. As Bane (1996, p. 25) wrote: 'We continue to think of risk in terms of *rush*, as if adrenaline is the entire experience. And is such a cheap experience worth having?' Extreme sports participants, in interviews, do not suggest risk-taking is the focus of the activity (Brymer, 2005). Rather, evidence suggests that extreme sports trigger deep personal changes in constructs such as courage and humility (Brymer & Oades, 2009).

The almost exclusive focus on risk among analysts has resulted in the neglect of an important dimension of extreme sports: the relationship of athletes to the natural world. A river without water means no kayaking. Wind in the wrong direction or too strong means no B.A.S.E. jumping. As yet, humanity cannot manufacture giant waves for surfing competitions or mountains the size of Mount Meru. More importantly, in-depth interviews with veteran participants often reveal that they place emphasis on their experience with nature and how the activities change their relationship to the natural world. This paper reports on findings from a larger hermeneutic phenomenological study on the extreme sport experience. In particular, the authors focus on the results that show a relationship between extreme sports participation and the natural world and how this relationship affects the development of ecologically sustainable practices.

### **Extreme Sports, Sustainability and the Natural World**

Extreme sports, whether expeditions, competitions or solo events, have an effect on the natural world. Everest is famous not only for being the highest point on earth but also for the amount of rubbish that is left over each year. Even the 'death zone' is littered with discarded oxygen bottles. For those theorists who have explored the extreme sport experience, the relationship between extreme sports and the natural world is usually portrayed as a desire by participants to conquer or battle against nature (Celsi *et al.*, 1993; Millman, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1999). The assumption is that society generates a sense of powerlessness and insignificance in people. As a result, people search for ways to prove to themselves that they are resilient and robust. Extreme sport participation is considered to be the ultimate medium for

demonstrating human power, where individuals' battle with nature at great personal risk in order to add importance and value to their lives (Le Breton, 2000; Palmer, 2000).

From a purely anthropocentric or materialistic perspective, the natural-world is *other* to humankind and valued only for its worth to humanity (Mathews, 2006). Mountains, rivers, waves and so on are considered to be merely resources existing for human consumption. Whereas once, before the advent of industrial production, extensive urbanisation, and efficient agriculture, humanity's relationship to the natural world may have been much more immediate, we have progressively insulated ourselves from nature in the name of safety, protection and comfort. Most tourists deliberately venturing into wild places expect protection from the natural world (Beedie & Hudson, 2003). From this anthropocentric or materialistic perspective, sustainable management is only important because damage to the natural world may have a negative impact on our lives or on the long-term viability of our economic activities (Mathews, 2006; Schultz, 2002). If sustainable practices are enacted, they are only instigated out of a direct desire for personal gain through activities such as 'recycling for money, conserving energy when rates are high, purchasing fuel efficient cars to save on fuel costs' (Schultz, 2002, p. 70). Current discussions of extreme sports fit with this perspective because participants are assumed to practice sustainability only because they need the natural world to live out their battle or find the thrills that they seek.

### **Ecopsychology and Sustainability**

Sustainability has become more than a system of resource management (Gifford, 2007; Vlek & Steg, 2007). Gifford (2007) argued that any real change in sustainable practice will most likely happen at an individual level, through changes in attitudes and everyday behaviour. For this change to happen, an individual will need to feel connected to the natural world (Dunbar, 2004; Schroll, 2007). Roszak (1992) developed the notion of ecopsychology specifically to explore this relationship, in part to suggest new ways, other than political protest or classroom education, to generate greater environmental awareness as well as ameliorate psychological problems caused or exacerbated by widespread alienation from nature. Proponents of ecopsychology advocate outdoor activities for both their psychotherapeutic and environmental benefits; they argue, not only that individuals' psychological health will improve, but also that greater engagement with the natural world will help to overcome social anomie stifling real progress on environmental issues.

Schultz explains that, despite popular perceptions to the contrary, humanity is a part of the natural world:

We are part of nature. We are born in nature; our bodies are formed of nature; we live by the rules of nature. As individuals, we are citizens of the natural world; as societies, we are bound by the resources of our environment; as a species, our survival depends on an ecological balance with nature. Yet as individuals, societies, and a species, we spend our lives trying to escape from nature. We separate ourselves from the natural environment with clothes, cars, houses and shopping malls. We build roads and cities to make for a

comfortable lifestyle. Indeed we live our lives as though the natural world was something abhorrent – something that needs to be tamed and controlled. (Schultz, 2002, pp. 61–62)

From this perspective, the natural world is not separate from humanity; it is at the very core of humanity, even if we live in a material and cultural world that may attempt to deny recognition of this fact. From this perspective, human beings can only really understand themselves by being engulfed in the natural world (Bourgeois, 2002). Humanity cannot be separated from nature in spite of our best efforts and most clever technology (Tymieniecka, 1988).

Schultz (2002) argues that by accepting this condition and returning to nature, experientially recognising that we are interconnected to the natural world, we will rekindle caring about, and the commitment to look after, the environment. Opotow (2000) describes this expanded sense of responsibility as a psychological inclusion of the natural world within a person's scope of justice. If the natural world is outside a person's scope of justice, nature is considered to be immaterial and of no intrinsic value. Conversely, if people feel psychologically connected to the natural world, they willingly make sacrifices to engage in sustainable practices (Mathews, 2006). Individuals who feel connected to or part of the natural world:

Place the well being of the larger ecosystem above anthropocentric or personal concerns, emphasize the interdependence of people and nature, view humans as only one of many parts of nature, and advocate decision making that considers the larger natural system in which humans are embedded. (Opotow, 2000, p. 1)

Feelings of connection, unity or being a part of the natural world, according to this eco-psychological perspective, are a causal step to emotional care and behavioural commitment, to wanting to protect the natural world, and to being willing to endure sacrifice in order to look after the natural world. A person will only undertake sustainable practices out of commitment to look after the natural world when he or she feels connected to, or part of the natural world (Schultz, 2002).

In this paper, part of a larger hermeneutic phenomenological study on the extreme sport experience, the authors examine the implications of the findings for understanding sustainable practices by asking, 'What can the extreme sports experience tell us about sustainability?' The hermeneutic phenomenological perspective encourages the researcher to return to the experience and opens up the use of a multitude of data sources for exploring a phenomenon like extreme sports. The researcher explores the phenomenon through interviews, biographies, poetry, video or in fact any source that might shed light on the experience in question. A phenomenological perspective focuses specifically on the experiences of participants in an activity, how they come to perceive in a particular way, and the terms indigenous to the activity that both arise from that experience and shape the way that it is experienced. Phenomenological research achieves rigor, in part, by 'bracketing' or setting aside pre-existing understandings of a phenomenon, especially when exploring the experiences of a minority population, like participants in extreme sports (see Dennett, 2003). The findings in this study are particularly significant because the research project did not set out to link the extreme sport experience to sustainability and environmental awareness;

the lead researcher, however, did avoid presupposing that extreme sports are necessarily related to risk or about conquering the natural world. Bracketing or holding in abeyance the more common, non-participant understanding of extreme sports as centred on risk-taking, carefully analysing the accounts of participants themselves in an open interview setting, allowed this unexpected ecological dimension of their firsthand experience to emerge more clearly.

## Method

### *Participants*

Data sources included interviews with 15 extreme sport participants (ten men and five women aged 30 to 75 years-old) and videos, biographies and autobiographies about extreme sport participants sourced from all over the world, including India, China, Taiwan and Nepal. Extreme sport participants were chosen based on the following criteria: (a) they participated in sporting activities where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake or accident is death; (b) they were prepared to unravel and reflect upon the extreme sport experience; and (c) they were outside the age group typically discussed in the literature about alternative sports.

The extreme sports included B.A.S.E. jumping, big wave surfing, extreme skiing, waterfall kayaking, extreme mountaineering and solo rope-free climbing. Participants of alternative, lifestyle or sub-culture sports that did not fit the definition as outlined above, including surfing, skiing, skateboarding and BMX (bicycle motocross) and so on, at a level where participants ran minimal risk of death, were not included. Participants were chosen for the sake of the phenomenon (Van Kaam, 1966) and for their willingness to explore the experience, not for their knowledge of the phenomenological framework.

### *Procedure*

Focused conversations with extreme sport participants were conducted face-to-face or by phone. One question guided the interview and analysis process: 'What is the extreme sport experience?' Or, to put it another way, 'How is the extreme sport experience perceived by participants?' Participants were not asked about their relationship to the natural world but provided discussions of the topic spontaneously.

Each individual tape was listened to, transcribed, read and thematically analysed as a separate entity, although all transcripts were revisited as themes became more explicit. Both formal and non-formal understandings of potential themes were continually questioned, challenged and assessed for relevancy. Questions such as, 'What is beneath the text as presented?', 'Am I interpreting this text from a position of interference from theory or personal bias?', and 'What am I missing?' guided the analytical process and reflection.

Interesting phrases were highlighted, and any relevant non-verbal considerations were noted. Accepting Steinbock's (1997) argument that phenomenological

descriptions are not about reproducing 'mere matters of fact or inner feelings' (Steinbock, 1997, p. 127), these notes were reconsidered in terms of potential underlying themes, expressed or implicit, or meaning units (Moustakas, 1994; DeMares, 1998). A similar interpretation process was undertaken with video, biographies and autobiographies.

Thematic ideas were grouped and further defined. These second-order themes were considered against the original transcripts to ensure the accuracy of interpretations. This entire process was repeated again and again.

The following quotes illustrate the themes taken from a variety of sources. Where the source is a direct participant quote, we have identified the subject with initials only, in addition to a brief description.

## **Results and Discussion**

Extreme sport participants report that, through the activity, they gained greater awareness that humanity is connected to the natural world. This connection is manifest as experiences of being at one with the natural world and being part of a powerful positive energy. As a result, some participants discussed how they came to care more about and to protect the natural world.

Laird Hamilton (Williams *et al.*, 2001), an internationally renowned pioneer of extreme surfing, argued that surfing big waves triggered his realisation that humanity was a part of the natural world, a recognition that led to a positive transformation in his attitude and behaviour. Hamilton went on to become an advocate for the protection of oceans:

You're not going to protect something that you don't appreciate and that you don't care about. So you have to make people care and there is . . . no better way to make somebody care about it than to participate in it, with it. And then they get a feeling – 'Hey, I care about it! What's going . . . how can we help it?' (Bartlett, 2008)

In this case, Hamilton's physical immersion in water, his participation 'with' the ocean through surfing, led to his own environmental awakening, and to his use of surfing and other activities to try to affect changes in the attitudes of others.

Jacobs (1998), a double PhD in psychology and health, wrote about how kayaking in extreme conditions triggered a deep appreciation for his place in the natural world, which instigated positive changes in his behaviour toward the natural world. Jacobs became a therapeutic practitioner teaching people to become more aware of the natural world as a route to positive mental health and environmental care.

Those ascending Everest, the highest point on Earth, also report similar positive personal transformations (Ahluwalia, 2003; Benegas, 2003; Chiow, 2003; Weare, 2003). For these participants, extreme sports facilitated an engagement with the natural world, which in turn triggered a change in behaviour. Alison Gannet developed a connection to the natural world through extreme skiing and now uses these experiences to record and consult on global warming issues (Gannett, 2008). These personal accounts and actual changes in political activity run directly contrary to



interpretations of extreme sports as 'battles against nature', at least in the way that these experiences affect some participants in the long term.

### Being at One with the Natural World

Interview participants also describe the experience within the extreme sport activity of being 'at one' with the natural world, and a dissolution or obscuring of the boundary between the individual and nature was a recurring theme in phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts. The Hawaiians have a word for this state, 'Ho-pupu,' or the experience of becoming one with a wave when surfing (Poirier, 2003). However, such experiences are also lived outside of surfing. Being at one with the natural world is spoken about in various related terms, such as being a part of the natural world, merging with the environment or being open to the environment (Olsen, 2001). For example, HS, a female B.A.S.E. jumper, describes how the activity brings about a feeling for her of being linked to nature:

All of a sudden you're totally connected to the environment. You're no longer an I. You're not bound by constraints, by a physical body anymore. It's a life-altering insight. (HS, female B.A.S.E. jumper, mid 30s)

BM, a female mountaineer, likens the feeling of oneness with the natural world to being vulnerable in love as she tries to communicate what she experiences in mountain climbing to non-participants:

Talking about a comparison with something that people can relate to, you can only really experience total love if you open your heart to it, and that makes you vulnerable, doesn't it? And I would say that in a wild environment, even if you don't open your heart to it, you are vulnerable because that's just the way it is. You are just a tiny little thing, very fragile . . . It's about feeling at one with the whole world, the whole universe. It's about understanding why, and you can't put it into words. You can't. . . . You have to experience it to really know what it's about. I mean you can't describe to someone what an orgasm is like. I mean you can try to, but unless you have it, you'll never know. Of course there are orgasms and *orgasms* as well. You can go for a walk in the woods or you can have an amazing experience in the woods. (BM, female mountaineer, mid 30s)

In BM's experience, just being in the natural world is not enough. A person must be in an environment that brings about a realisation of how small she is in relation to the natural world, engaged in an activity that highlights one's fragility as well as connection to the environment. The extreme environment encourages this realisation of one's own limits simultaneous with the feeling of being connected or at one with the natural world. Alienation from the natural world can encourage a distorted view of one's own grandness; connection actually highlights a person's true scale and dependence on nature.

SB, an extreme kayaker, interpreted being connected to or at one with the natural world in more of a physiological manner.

They say it's because the human body is eighty percent water and that type of thing. I don't really know, but I'm totally relaxed and at home on water. (SB, male kayaker, late 30s)

Although SB does not elaborate upon the significance of this point, he highlights the shared substance of his own body and the fluid medium in which he paddles. His body is not merely embedded in the natural world; they share the same substance. From this, he feels a sense of relaxation; or he explains his comfort by noting the like-ness of body and water.

### **Feel the Force**

Extreme sport participants also describe the feeling of connection to the natural world as an experience of being part of a natural force or energy. For example RM, a big wave surfer, explores how being connected to the energy from a particular big surf beach has given him an appreciation for many aspects of ocean life:

[The beach has] given me a great appreciation of the aesthetics of the ocean, from whales to sharks to dolphins to penguins to the rocks or to whatever, you know. Every aspect . . . it's a magnificent thing to do . . . You get great energy, fantastic energy on the sort of coast where there's big surf; you feel the energy, it's just amazing . . . You know, there's a lot of energy, and you get off on that energy. (RM, male surfer, early 50s)

HS, the female B.A.S.E. jumper, continued her reflection on the relationship to the natural world by describing how this energy can enhance life and feelings towards the natural world. She especially contrasts the 'energy' of the natural world with the built environment she inhabits in a city:

What I like is to look at something like a beautiful cliff and to be able to climb up there and then fly off it like a bird. That's what I like about it, and that's why I keep doing it . . . being in a wilderness environment where the place is still powerful, the place still has energy and its giving back to you . . . You know in the city there is some energy, but it tends to be draining. Like if you spend a day in the city, you feel like being run over by a truck. Whereas if you go to a beautiful wilderness environment, and you're part of the environment, then for me you get an insight into the fact that we're interconnected and that while we can die, life and everything is connected. We're part of this cycle.

I mean, this sounds very esoteric I know and its difficult to put into words, but with BJ [B.A.S.E. jumping], you can go places that other people can't go. You can stand on the edge of these huge cliffs and, you know, put your arms in the air, and you're totally vulnerable and totally part of the environment at the same time. It gives an opportunity to experience places and a way of looking at things that we can't normally do because we're too restricted by fences and rules and our own fear. The first time I B.A.S.E. jumped, it was one of those experiences that shatters the way that you looked at things in the past. You look at things through all these filters, and we judge stuff without even being aware of it. It's an unconscious thing, constantly, constantly filtering and judging. An experience like B.A.S.E. jumping helps you shatter all of those things. (HS, female B.A.S.E. jumper, mid 30s)

Here HS begins by relating her experience of B.A.S.E. jumping to flying like a bird. HS experiences an energy coming from the natural world and a feeling of connection with the natural world. Through B.A.S.E. jumping, HS is able to experience vulnerability and a connection to the natural world that she does not feel in everyday life. Moreover, her experience of B.A.S.E. jumping affects her everyday perception of the

environment and her own place in it, 'shattering' her prior ways of experiencing the world around her.

For these participants, engaging in extreme sports generated an experience that they did not seek or expect. Participants felt connected to the natural world in ways that are difficult for them to describe and that lingered after the wave had dissipated or they had placed their feet on solid ground. Contrary to theoretical perspectives that construe extreme sports as an attempt to assert superiority over the natural world, interview participants and other first-hand accounts point to the experience as producing a sense of connection to the natural world and recognition of one's own place, and scale, within it. According to some of the interviews, this relationship can only be realised when participating in the natural world at a level that generates feelings of vulnerability and experiences of connection to a life-enhancing energy; nature alone, without the extreme sport, does not have the same effect as it does not generate the right experiential conditions without a catalyst. Even novices who may initially approach extreme sports in search of thrills or to test their own courage may find in the experience itself a dawning awareness of their connection to nature that transforms them in unforeseen ways.

Eco-psychologists theorise a direct link between an individual's sustainable practices and feeling part of, or connected to, the environment. As a result of their experiences in extreme sports, participants report feeling part of the natural world, which makes it likely that she or he will partake in sustainable practices out of care and commitment to the natural world, a possibility that is worthy of further study. The potential precursor role of extreme sports for generating environmental awareness is particularly intriguing because the gateway to the transformational process, the extreme sport itself, may be able to attract populations who might not initially seek greater awareness of, or connection to, the natural world.

## Conclusion

Critics often misconstrue extreme athletes as merely risk-takers and adrenaline junkies intent on proving themselves by battling against the natural world. This paper has provided a counter-argument based on participants' comments about the natural world as well as some of their autobiographical trajectories. Participants speak about an experience of intimate connection to the landscape or nature. These accounts of self-transformation and dawning environmental awareness are more consistent with what the participants themselves say in interviews. In particular, the authors focused on how this growing relationship and experience of nature would likely relate to the development of ecologically sustainable practices. This research reveals that extreme sports may act as a precursor to undertaking environmentally sustainable practices.

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