

Venturing Reflections:

Heritage crafts, Storytelling and Nature Connection as a purposeful developmental programme

by Rhyddian Knight



GETTING OUT...

Based around a remote bothy in Lochaber, 'Regeneration Volunteers' have been taking part in working parties at the bothy, supporting the wider work of Venture Scotland for the past seven years. Having had the privilege of helping facilitate this, I wanted to share some ideas which might be of benefit to other practitioners involved in using themes of sustainability and land use as a developmental vehicle.

The overall strategy for the working parties was originally formulated in 2006 through local consultation researching the history, folklore and ecology of Glen Etive which culminated in a map and report called: 'Our Vision for the Bothy'. This report has been instrumental in jumpstarting projects as participants have felt an increased sense of ownership and, rather than reaching consensus and fine detail, has established 'no objection' on broad principles for regeneration.

Since that time, we have been engaged in a number of practical projects. Volunteers have built an outdoor kitchen from local timbers, clay sand and straw, restored dilapidated dry stone enclosures, created a tree nursery and garden for perennial edible plants, lime plastered our restored byre, planted trees, dug ditches, installed LED lighting and are ongoing with the installation of a water-filtration system and micro-hydroelectric project.

The approach is refreshingly simple. The leaders biannually review and plan their work, leadership style and the tasks which they feel have priority. Our working parties are led by two volunteer leaders and two volunteer support workers. The tasks themselves focus on encouraging biodiversity and meeting a human need through maintaining the bothy and creating outdoor learning resources. Both tasks focus on the regeneration of the valley that was, until the clearings of 1723, '... length and breadth, clothed with majestic Firs and spreading Oaks'¹.

If I were to frame the working party experience as a developmental pathway, I would say that engendering the twin impulses to *tend the wild* (support biodiversity) and *engage in subsistence activity* (meet human needs skilfully) is a social and ecological imperative for our own and future generations.

Our clients are young people making the transition from 'participant' to 'supported volunteer' during the six month 'community' phase of the Venture Scotland programme. They are afforded the chance to hang out with a diverse mix of engaged 'regeneration' volunteers, practice new-found skills and really achieve



something. These shared experiences go a long way towards finding friendships and a sense of 'meaning' for all concerned.

On a less tangible level, I can intuit that the experience of tending the wild whilst engaging in subsistence activity provides a potent social environment for personal development. It is my assertion that these experiences afford our emerging young adults, (who have often had difficult formative experiences) the opportunity to work through some psychological territory not possible in the rigours of their home environments (or even modern degenerative culture in general). On the subject of stressed, or anxious parenting, Bill Plotkin tells us that:

'Without challenges, children become afraid of risk, psychologically fragile, and anxious. This undermines their sense of identity and a sense of accomplishment... Through failure, we learn how to cope. By learning how to cope, we become adventuresome enough, later in life, to wander into the world in search of our souls.'²

As an outdoor leader, I must acknowledge that some young adults in my care, often still need the opportunity to learn the lessons of childhood concurrently with the lessons and social norms that our society demands of their age. [As outdoor practitioners we are well placed and privileged to teach the importance and freedoms associated with being self reliant and resilient adults].

BEING OUT...

The informal simple approach, offered by the Team Leaders, has led me to some interesting observations which I would like to share:

1. People meet on an equal footing to learn a skill, the utilisation of which is for the benefit of the wider community.





GOING HOME...

Through a project like this we can support our young people in becoming connected to nature and themselves through understanding what food, warmth, shelter and story are for. Whilst we can hopefully model, albeit on a small scale what healthy community can feel like, all expeditions end with the inevitable....

We all transition back to our 'normal' lives. Participants and volunteers alike move back into the wider society, which does not necessarily model or support regenerative principles; often giving no validation whatsoever to the importance of Heritage to human health. The goal of transferring learning becomes a necessity if we are to serve both our participants and our society.

When faced with the seemingly impossible task of integrating a regenerative experience in the outdoors to the often pathologically adolescent marketplace of work and education, I give my clients some advice given to my own community:

"The most radical thing we can do is to slow down and develop meaningful relationships with each other" Mark Morey⁵.

It is my clear understanding that deep nature *connection*, modelled by leaders yet practiced by all, coupled with the informal mentoring which exists through regeneration work offers a real opportunity for creating a healthy, regenerative culture.

It is my sincere hope that the Venture Scotland Journey can, and will, embody these principles and give participants the tools and certainty to remain *aware, connected and curious* in the clamour of the inner city. I hope that it also offers you, the reader, some soul food for thought in informing your own programmes. ■



2. [When 1 is achieved] The learning and application process is deeply satisfying for all the diverse backgrounds and life stages represented by the group, and offers a positive social environment in which people can engage and relate with each other. This is an obvious reality, yet extremely difficult to achieve in other more formal learning environments.
3. As the projects tend to work with primary materials with a minimum degree of processing/refinement; the individuals often arrive at an aesthetic and useful result which brings an inherent sense of fulfilment. They, and the users of the resource that has been created, understand what the 'things are' and 'what they are for'.
4. *The potency of storytelling in creating and reconstructing meaning cannot be over-emphasised.* Emphasis on personal or local myths, folk tales and recounting of previous group experiences has become a norm for the groups 'downtime' with tea breaks and evening fireside time becoming a platform for music and tales.
5. The sense of meaning engendered by a sense of ownership, telling/hearing stories AND working for the wider community has led to many young people to finding a genuine sense of purpose. On returning over time, these same young people now teach, demonstrate and role model skills and other associated aptitudes to new volunteers.
6. Prolonged involvement enthused with meaning and purpose has led not just to a deeper relationship with each other, but goes a long way toward establishing a deeper relationship with Kinlocheteive.
7. Through this process, I have witnessed volunteers' awareness of Heritage at the bothy move from a static, stylised picture of the past, to a vital, present force which spurs them to interaction and makes them aware of the precious gift of natural resources.

Setting up and experiencing learning environments such as this, to my mind at least, is a worthy 'outdoor pursuit' for us as practitioners. Based on these observations, It is now my firm belief that a Healthy culture, embedded in a relationship with land, for human and more than human ends; is another name for *Living Heritage*.

REAPING THE HARVEST...

Jon Young, on a recent course with the UK based 'Art of Mentoring' made a distinction between genuine 'nature connection' and 'nature experience':

'There are three layers of listening. The first is the rather superficial form of *nature experience*. Second, *nature connection* is a social experience in and with nature, thirdly Deep nature Connection; this is what we are aiming for... it is about curiosity.'³

The Venture Scotland Journey is just beginning to programme in time to teach and practice the 'Core Routines for Nature Connection' ⁵ throughout its 12 month programme. We recognise that a supportive nature connected organisation is a lot more helpful, fun and resilient than an unsupportive unconnected one.



Notes:

Kinlocheteive Bothy is the modern Gaelic name for the 'shelter at the head of Loch Etive', in Glen Etive, Lochaber on the North East border of Argyll, Scotland.

1. Volume 7, New Statistical Accounts of Scotland.
2. P98 para 2. Plotkin, B, Nature and the Human Soul- Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World. New World Library.
3. Authors course notes, Jon Young speaking at Art of Mentoring UK gathering, Marcassie Farm, 2011.
4. See Young et al. Coyotes Guide to Connecting with Nature. 2010 edition. Wilderness Awareness School.
5. <http://markmorey.com/mark-morey>
[A short video on the theme presented in this article can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6ty2ziHVVg> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6ty2ziHVVg>> entitled 'Venturing Reflections'].

Author's Notes



Rhyddian holds a BSc (Hons) in Outdoor Studies and has been kindling hearths and igniting minds in the field for the past 11 years. He lives off grid with his green-fingered partner in Morayshire, supporting regenerative cultural design as a freelance guide and practitioner. He remains a stalwart proponent of using natural building, wildcraft and the short 'J' in kithing culture.

Photographs: from the author and George Logan [<http://www.georgelogan.co.uk/>] for Scottish Natural Heritage