# Landshaping: A Concept for **Exploring the Construction** of Environmental Meanings within Tropical Australia

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#### Introduction

You've always got to look out the window in the tropics ...when I drive to school-I always drive-every day I like to stop and look down the river. I pray to get that red light every morning. And if I don't get that red light it can put me in a bad mood. Because I like to stop, look down that section of the river and contemplate the boats, the water, and the calm. And then I come 'round the corner and I see Magnetic Island sitting out there in the ocean, and that's what I do before I go to school (Tom, a science and SOSE teacher on his way to work in early morning).

Dusk is very much a peaceful time. It's time to unwind if you've had a busy day. I think it's just beautiful. Every time I walk up Castle Hill [in Townsville] I just throw my arms open wide and just like a little kid I shout at all the colours, the different colours of the leaves, the sky, the hills. I just love that time of day, being out there. It's very soft and it's warm and fuzzy. You are crazy to be inside when the sun is setting. It definitely makes you want to live, you know. It's one of those things that make you think, 'Oh, it's worth being here' (Bronwen, a SOSE teacher walking after work at sunset).

This is a paper about environmental stories and the meanings we create for ourselves about our experiences. The creation of meaning is both intrinsic and extrinsic to environmental learning and to the explicit goals of environmental education, which are to develop socio-ecological understandings and skills to promote the conservation of biological and cultural diversity. My discussion calls attention to the process of how meanings (use of the plural is intentional) are created and expressed through language, and how language practices are important in constituting educational and environmental meanings.

I have divided the paper into three parts. In part one, I introduce a theoretical concept called 'landshaping' as a conceptual tool for making apparent the relationships between words and

The creation of meaning is both intrinsic and extrinsic to environmental learning. In this paper I call attention to the process of how language practices and imagination are important in constituting environmental meanings, as stories of the places in which we live. A concept of landshaping is introduced as a conceptual tool for thinking about the agentic construction of environmental meanings. Research data collected in north Queensland show that individual subjectivities do not necessarily align with the binary thought lines of human identity ('us') and nature ('not us') commonly reproduced within environmental education. Ideas of the natural can be problematic in environmental learning, particularly in cross-cultural education experiences. Landshaping can be used as a research strategy and as a pedagogical technique for revealing diversities and illuminating complexities in how we as individuals, and together, create environmental understandings for ourselves.

ideas, which form (shape) our most intimate environmental understandings. Words can and do shape expressible ideas--remembering that some of our most intense and joyous environmental experiences lie in the realms beyond language.

I don't know-it is sometimes hard to really say how you can feel (Joseph, a marine biologist, attempting to translate his experiences of swimming in the warm seas off Cape Cleveland, Townsville).

There aren't any words to describe it (Hamish, a marine aquaculture economist, losing the language to describe his experiences sailing on the Great Barrier

It's another place, like it's beyond words (Bruce, a marine biologist, on scuba diving on the Great Barrier

Following some theoretical considerations, I return to people's stories, which are always more interesting. The second part of the paper focuses on the constitution of individual environmental meanings-those that can be expressed to a researcher—and how these intersect with the binary language practices used in constituting public and educational environmental discourse. The findings come from research conducted with thirty-two people living and working in north Queensland who identify themselves as environmentally active in some way. The group includes high school students, environmental educators, community activists, marine and chemical scientists, environmental managers and eco-tourism operators and includes people born in Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji. What I learned from investigating people's tropical stories raises some conundrums for environmental education practice.

One solution is suggested in the third part of the paper, which explores the language of forest meanings in tropical Australia. These data were gathered from non-fiction texts such as tourist brochures (though an argument can be mounted that these are highly fictionalised pieces of writing) biographies and scientific and historical accounts. I conclude by making the argument that paying attention to the diversities of how meanings are constructed can be a powerful pedagogical tool for both environmental research and curriculum practice.

### Part one: A concept of landshaping

For investigating the active and subjective construction of environmental meanings, I came up with the concept of 'landshaping', which can be used as a mechanism, a conceptual platform if you like, for thinking about how people make sense of themselves within the tropical places they inhabit. Landshaping conceptually ties together the discursive shapes of human(ised) selves with the discursive shapes of material terrains and those other(ed), differentiated bodies (living and non-living) that form the dominant subjects of environmental education. Landshaping is a technique for paying attention to language practices people use to constitute meanings for place, and the bodies living within placemeanings that I interpret as 'environmental' in order to define the direction of the research gaze.

Landshaping calls on a body of feminist poststructuralist theorising, playing on the notion that what we know the world to be is shaped through our imaginations. Language can both create and express how we actively imagine our world(s) to be (Davies 1994, 2000). Landshaping refracts the theoretical position of Cixous (Conley 1991, Sarup 1993) who argues that a subject, in all its reflective facets, exists within and through discursive practices, expounding an idea that (human) being and discourse are inseparable. Landshaping comes from a theoretical position where phenomenology slides into poststructuralism, taking up the work of environmental historians, geographers, phenomenologists and literary theorists who investigate the complexities of the many different ways in which socio-cultural meanings can be constituted in relation to the earth on which we all live (see, for example, Abram 1997, Bonyhady & Griffiths 2001, Frost 1996, Griffiths 1996, Harvey 1996, Schama 1995, Tuan 1974, Tuan 1977, Somerville 1999). Ideas of language, experience and place are worth exploring in environmental education praxis to see where they may lead.

Landshaping is one means for thinking about how researchers within the broad field of environmental education can pay attention to the relationships between powerful acts of human imagination (and our gifts of meta-cognition) and the expression of our imaginations in language, which continue to shape our understandings through time. As such, landshaping can be used to analyse how people imagine themselves in relation to material, biophysical environments and to explore the stories they tell about themselves and the meanings they create. This is because no single storyline is held to be more important (or have greater meaning) than another. You may prefer to privilege scientific discourses, where theories are expected to fit observable facts, but when used as an analytical technique, landshaping makes no differentiation between a scientific or a mytho-poetic or a spiritual or any other reality, for these are all meaningful in constitutions of environmental meaning.

A landshaping analysis attempts to make visible and apparent the constitutive acts of making one's self (or selves) as an environmentally knowledgeable person. It has similarities to ideas of ecological identity (see Mathews 1991, Thomashow 1997) with at least one key difference. One of the central concerns of contemporary poststructuralist theorising has been that of subjectivity or, more correctly, subjectivities. While identity is a quality characteristically held to be fairly constant and consistent though time, research and theorising concerning subjectivity reveals the fractured, mobile and contingent nature of identity. Poststructuralist ideas illuminate how all of our lived experiences are subjective—even our experiences with known and quantifiable phenomena such as light, time, gravity, mass, momentum and death are subjective, though not always unique. If we accept the proposition that subjectivities can be shifting, contingent and labile, then it is easier to understand, from a research perspective, how one person's constitution of themselves in one context can be quite different from how they imagine themselves in another. Research efforts reveal the extent to which subjectivity, language and place can be indistinguishable (Abram 1997, Bonyhady & Griffiths 2001, Muecke 1997).

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Contemporary thinking on the shifting nature of subjectivity can be applied to how people come to understand themselves in relation to the places in which they live. It seems reasonable to explore these issues and to look at the educational questions thrown up when language practices and meanings become subjects for environmental research.

# Part two: Problematising the natural divide

As an education researcher, I was particularly interested in the intersection between individual landshaping practices, and common landshapes reproduced in public environmental education. That is, whether people's construction of personal environmental meanings align with the common discourses of environmental education practices which reproduce western imaginative practices dividing a human, cultural identity from a category of otherness we call 'nature' and 'the natural environment'. I use the word 'imaginative' deliberately in the previous sentence. Although we hold 'nature' and 'the natural environment' to be the key subjects of environmental education, the terms represent conditions of human identity, in the sense that these categories identify that which gets constituted as 'us' or 'not us'. Membership of either category changes historically and with reference to different contexts and social ideas. What is 'human' or 'nature' is historically mobile, variable and highly politicised, but the divisions are both obstinate and enduring (Kirby 1997). It is important to

recognise that because the boundaries between 'nature' and 'human' are imaginary and shifting, these categories cannot be empirically decided (Harding 1991).

Ask thirty-two people the question 'what is nature?' and you will get thirty-two very different responses. This is not surprising. A large body of recent literature has explored, from various theoretical perspectives, how 'nature' is not an empirical, material thing, but a complex, polysemic, social idea (see, for example, Cronon 1996, Gough 1997, Harding 1991, Ortner 1974, Schiebinger 1993, Soper 1995, Taylor 1991). In western thought, 'nature' is a category into which all manner of living bodies and inert forms are imagined as belonging together, whether these bodies be vegetable or flesh, invertebrate or vertebrate, sensate or insensate, terrestrial, aqueous or gaseous. 'Nature' is axiomatic as being those bodies that are not generative of being human-however a human disposition gets defined (Soper 1995). Which raises a problematic within environmental education, that the natural subjects of the field cannot easily be defined nor agreed upon.

If you ask thirty-two people the question, 'what is the environment?'—the named subject, after all, of environmental education-the responses are so variable as to be uncategorisable. This poses problems for reporting research findings when so much research activity is itself dependent on acts of categorisation. If you really want to create difficulties, ask a range of people to define 'the natural environment'—a term used freely within environmental education. Within my group of research participants I collected narratives on everything from a teenager's uncleaned bedroom, which was held to be a natural environment by that teenager, to discussions on whether a feral-weed-choked rainforest or an algaefied, inshore coral reef can be considered as 'natural' at all.

'In western thought, 'nature' is a category into which all manner of living bodies and inert forms are imagined as belonging together'

One environmental manager, Ursula, made the observation that rainforest may be experienced by a visitor as a wild place, maybe indeed as an edenic 'pristine wilderness' in the overheated language of tourist brochures. But an ecological scientist will read the same place in quite a different way, perhaps as a pig-ridden place being destroyed by feral animals that uproot the integrity of the forest floor in their search for worms. These differences between constitutions of 'the natural' are what Ursula deals with every day in environmental management work.

The imagined, but persisting separation of that which is 'natural' from the realms of human culture, is a powerful and persistent imaginative act of landshaping, but the binary is

hardly a universal landshape, despite attendant claims it is so. When research attention is turned to how individuals create personal environmental meanings 'natural' boundaries become increasingly fuzzy as complexities emerge. I offer two stories here as evidence of those complexities.

#### Blair's 'twin' forest

The following extract is from a conversation I had with Blair, an industrial chemist and member of the Green Party, Blair was raised in Kuranda, a little town near Cairns on the Atherton Tablelands. The shapes of the country we grew up in are always with us and Blair describes himself as 'very, very lucky' to be 'a Kuranda boy'. Blair is professionally competent in his use of scientific 'objectivity', but he abandons this distanced vision in constituting personal environmental meanings.

All my life I've always gone back to the forest. Even when I was out in the coalmines, out west, on my weekends off I would go back [to the coastal rainforest, there you have everything. When I get to areas like that my mind goes free. I consider myself to be an animal in the forest ... The problem we have in our society, as far as I am concerned, is that we consider ourselves different to the other animals and the plants that inhabit our forests, that inhabit our world, whereas we are just animals. You see, when I'm in a forest, I am just there. You don't smell anything apart from the forest, you don't think anything apart from the sound of the birds and looking and searching and watching the leaves and just losing yourself literally. It doesn't have an explanation. ... You are just there. The forest to me is where I belong. I don't have words really, the forest is the be all, the end all. It's the start, the creation. It's the finish.

Blair struggles to express his own subjectivities within the forest in other than binary terms. He refers to himself as being 'just there'. He doesn't constitute himself as assuming a human shape, but that of an animal, not different to the 'other' animals and plants within the forest. (The binary terms of 'us' and 'other' always seem to constrain the storyline because we are so habituated to thinking in this way.) When I asked Blair to describe 'his relationship' with his home forest, he got very cross with me. He strenuously denied he had 'a relationship' with the forest, because to suggest such is to recognise the existence of a dualism between the forest and himself, a construction he adamantly rejected.

I don't have a relationship with the forest. I am a member of the forest community, there is no differentiation Yeah, that's an interesting point you've brought up for discussion because I actually haven't thought of that aspect—of me and the forest as dialectic. It's just one of those things. When I walk into the forest I'm there and that's the whole story. I am just a member. I belong there. It's where I really should be most of the time in fact.

Blair's environmental activism can be explained in part through how he constitutes his forest as forming his own subjectivity. In a story about urban development along the Myola Road, north of Kuranda, Blair says:

Someone has come along and clear-felled every one of their eight acres, so you have this beautiful green [forest] and then it just stops. There's this hole and this is where you can see the different thinking in people's heads. I can't see why people would do it. It hurts me, you know. It's the classic example of identical twins that feel when the other twin gets hurt. When I see something like that I get a stab of pain, literally, a stab of pain. I think 'Jesus, why the bloody hell did you do that?' There is no reason for it, no reason at all.

Blair's interview is but one example of how research data show individuals may constitute/imagine themselves in ways that do not engage a nature/culture binary in creating their own private environment meanings. Yet in trying to express wholeness, a sense of boundary fuzziness as it were, these same individuals find that the discourses available to them almost insist that they speak of themselves in terms of a separated human being. Speaking wholeness-as in attempting to express twin-ship with a forest body-can be difficult within the discourses of a society founded on ideas of differentiation.

# Adi learns nature talk

Adi is a marine educator from Fiji who was undertaking postgraduate studies in north Queensland at the time of interview. In speaking with her, I discovered she had to learn the meaning of 'nature' when she went to school and was exposed to Australasian curriculum ideas. Adi reported that when, at the age of twelve, she had been placed in a Natural Science class, she had raised her hand to ask the teacher, what was the meaning of the term 'natural'. The teacher described its meaning as everything around her. Adi was puzzled by this nature terminology because there is no such term in her village language. According to Adi, in Fiji, every living body has its own name and category of identity, so that bodies as different as avian, reptilian and vegetable bodies are not collected together as representing a condition of otherness. As Adi said, 'every thing is given its own name, we do not put them all together'.

All through my childhood I was brought up within two realms. It was like living two different lives. I leave home and everything is left there forever, you know. I come to the primary school and once through the gates, you have to try and think in English because everything was in English and at the end of the day I leave this behind, I go home. We had this subject in primary school; it was called Natural Science. We students said: 'What is this natural science. What are these talks about everything that is around us?' ... When someone says to us 'Natural Science', we don't really know what it means, the word 'natural', because it is not part of our vocabulary. The teacher has to explain it

I use words like 'nature' and 'natural' well now but this depends on where I am and how I am thinking. If I am in my village [in Fiji], I tend to dissociate that word nature in my thinking and concentrate on ... naming the things individually. But over here [in Australia] I have to think of nature as meaning something, I still tend to be living in two kinds of worlds all the time ... In Fiji, we don't have a word for nature because each aspect of nature, as you might call it, is so much a part of our way of life.

In western thought lines, 'nature' is claimed as a universalised understanding, inclusive of all human cultural experiences (hints of hegemony again). There seem to be no terms similar to the western constitution of 'nature' (as a generalised condition of otherness) in the indigenous languages of Australia or the languages around the South Pacific region. (If you know of an exception to this statement please let me know and I'll amend my words.) This means that when we teach the nature of 'nature studies' or 'the natural environment' of environmental studies, we are reproducing a set of ideas that are not culturally inclusive of the understandings of all the students we encounter. When nature/culture binaries are uncritically reproduced within curriculum, different forms of landshaping practices remain unidentified and invisible. Crosscultural education experiences can mean, as they did for Adi, living in 'different realms' all the time, and having to cope with quite different ontologies concerning the constitution of environmental meaning.

# Conundrums for environmental education

Blair and Adi's individual stories illuminate some conundrums for environmental education and research practice. There are important personal, social and cultural differences in how people constitute environmental meanings, as there are innumerable diverse ways for landshaping environmental understandings. The absence of any agreement for the material location for the conceptual boundaries between that which is held as belonging the categories of 'nature' or 'the natural environment' intrigues me as an educator and raises questions about the ways in which these terms are constituted as subjects and objects of learning within education practice.

Environmentalist discourse promotes 'learning about the environment' and 'acting for the environment' (Lucas 1979) and 'saving nature' and 'enhancing human relationships with nature'. Yet little or no clear physical or empirical location is given to these disembodied ideas real people are supposed to save. 'Nature', along with 'the' environment of public education discourse, becomes constituted as having a universalised meaning without reference to geography, latitude, climate or culture. Clearly the nature(s) and environment(s) I may 'act towards' in the northeast tropics are distinguishable from those of more temperate places along the same Australian coastline. So why do we use singular terms such as 'nature' and 'the natural environment' in formal curriculum policy and syllabus documents when research shows the primary meaning of both terms lies not in their relation to any embodied reality, but as imaginary categories separated from the conditions of being 'human'? Is this because environmental education is really all about 'us' humans after all?

As an educator I remain puzzled as to whether binary language practices adequately serve the pedagogical aims of environmental education. Are we ignoring the problem that every person engaged in environmental education, whether as a teacher or student, has to decide on their own meanings for concepts of 'nature' and 'the natural environment' because, as discursive constructions, they cannot be empirically defined? What implications are there for learning? I cannot answer these questions yet, but they need some thinking and discussion.

My data show that when people constitute their own meanings, they don't necessarily hold on to the binary scripts of western imagination and they often seek/create strategies to abandon binary thinking for acts of holistic imagination. Which raises another question of how can we, as educators, pay attention to these diversities, as they are subjectively constituted/ imagined to enrich our collective experiences in working with students and colleagues?

#### Part three: Landshaping as pedagogy

I originally devised landshaping as a conceptual tool for conducting research into the constitution of environmental meanings. I have since realised that landshaping can also act as a pedagogical tool for making sense of multiple discourses and subjectivities (including gendered subjectivities) constituting environmental meanings. Concepts of 'nature', 'the environment' and 'the natural environment' may be the enabling storylines for defining environmental education as a separate field of educational endeavour. But their conceptualisation may be too diffuse to be as educationally meaningful as we might hold them to be.

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One strategy for sliding out of the problematic could be paying very close attention to the diversities of language and place meanings in education practice and making acts of landshaping a topic for study. This does take a little research, but it is not difficult, especially if you have access to historical accounts and contemporary non-fiction environmental writings. We can pay much closer attention to the contingent and diverse social and cultural constitution of environmental meanings within curriculum practices. Here, I suggest one exemplar for doing so, which is to take a recognisable geographic place and excavate the meanings and stories which have become attached to that place.

In this example, I look at the varied constructions of the diverse, wet woodlands that grow abundantly (when given the chance) in the Cairns and Atherton Tablelands region. This is not an extensive account because of the limitations of space. Even so, what emerges from this landshaping research is not a singular 'environment' but a palimpsest of discourses constituting different politicised meanings for the same woodlands-meanings which layer upon one another so that what emerges is a complex play of historical and contemporary landshapes. The woodlands become a diverse interdependent collection of ideas and imagination as much as they are a diverse interdependent collection of vegetable matter. The exercise is both confusing, because our notions of singularity and universality are shattered, and enriching, because diversity is revealed. You may like to workshop something similar with your students.

## Landshaping tropical wet woodlands

The dense, wet, overwhelmingly, green woodlands around the Cairns area have been extant since local climate grew wetter after the last ice age. Further north, over the Daintree River, in the Noah Creek and Cooper Creek areas, pockets of woodlands are over 100 million years old. In the Cairns region, their original caretakers knew these woodlands as bama balmba (Bottoms 1999). Bama is imperfectly translated from Djabugay language as meaning rainforest people or person and balmba as home place.

From home country, bama balmba, the woodlands were transmuted into scrub and/or jungle with the advent of European settlement. Scrub, as Toohey (1994) points out, is something that can be cut down and exploited for its timber resources. A scrubber, in fact, can literally scrub out The Scrub—'scrubbers' was the name given to timber fellers. The cedar getters went through most accessible tracts of woodland before the Cairns and Tablelands areas were opened for immigrant settlement in the 1870s.

When Devanny (1944) undertook her travels in the north, she wrote extensively about the jungles, constituting these same woodlands though the language of unknowable, impenetrable, tangled greenness. Earlier, in 1882, Christie Palmerston, adventurer and gold prospector had remarked that the forests contained 'too much parasitic verdure for my tastes' (Frost 1996, p. 192). In the same year, the Norwegian naturalist Carl Lumholtz, described the same vegetation as 'so dense that a person can hardly penetrate it without being so torn and prickled that blood flows from the wounds' (Frost 1996, p. 1895). Devanny (1944, p. 68) called the woodlands bordering Trinity Inlet as 'an un-British world', as indeed they are.

If jungle can be 'a tangled hell' (Slater 1996), these vegetative expanses have subsequently been reshaped as rainforest, which is a more luminous and cleaner word than scrub, woodlands or 'bug ridden lawyer vine thicket' or 'that awful thick green stuff' (the last two phrases were used by Nick, a study participant who disliked wet forests). Rainforest has now become the common language for constituting woodland meaning within educational, economic and scientific discourses in the wet tropics. The term itself is said to have been coined by A.F.W. Schimper in 1989 and is translated from the German 'tropishe Regenwald'. Originally used as a scientific description, Slater (1996, p. 117) writes that in contemporary society 'the term rainforest has acquired over the last two decades, strong edenic overtones' similar to those conjured by the term wilderness. The woodlands are simultaneously constituted as wilderness, importing American and European notions of the wild other to this hot, northern Australian country. And since the 1980s new constitutions of universalised World Heritage values have been attached to these same woodlands, which are now under a World Heritage Area management regime.

As the tourism industry has taken off, the woodlands are configured, in the enticing language of tourist brochures, as places of 'paradise', as 'lush', 'precious', 'pristine', 'ancient', 'marvellous', 'prehistoric', 'fragile', 'evolutionary masterpieces', 'unique', 'diverse', 'green edens', 'Earth's magnificent piece of art' (etc.). (Granted the wet woodlands are in need of conservation, but they also may need rescuing from hyperbole). As well, these are places where ideas of 'nature' and 'the natural environment' can readily become attached, and are the places where children study and learn.

So what does such an excavation mean? A confusion of meanings are thrown into the light, making visible the impossibility of knowing any one place, or conglomeration of vegetable, animal and mineral matter, as any one singular thing. A singular notion of 'the environment' disappears into vegetable complexity. A wet woodland can be the place 'where nature has worked laboriously to create a masterpiece, her palette streaked with marvellous greens, refreshing blues and comforting shades of brown' (Reef and Rainforest Coast, tourist brochure, no date, no author acknowledged). Wet woodland can be a jungle and a scrub and a wilderness and a bug ridden lawyer vine thicket and a paradise all at once.

This is the purpose of a landshaping analysis, to bring complexity out into the open where we can more fully research, in Cixous' words (Conley 1991) a 'mobile and living continuity'. 🗭

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