

# **The power of place: Protest site pagans**

Adrian Harris

*Research Centre for Therapeutic Education,  
University of Roehampton, UK*

## **Abstract**

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My fieldwork with activists living on UK protest camps revealed the impact of spending extended periods of time in the organic environment. The wilderness effect – previously described in the context of US treks in places like the Grand Canyon – was apparent even in comparatively urban environments and catalysed a spiritual emergence for several people. I begin by explaining the context of protest site activism and spirituality. I then draw on my fieldwork to describe how key aspects of the wilderness effect were expressed on UK protest sites and discuss some of the life changing experiences catalysed by the effect. I then outline my model of embodied situated cognition and use it to provide a partial explanation for how the wilderness effect works.

## **Introduction**

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Research has established that “participation in activities based in wilderness and wilderness-like settings can have profound effects on both groups and individuals” (Ewert & McAvoy, 2000: 13); this phenomena is often referred to as the “wilderness effect” (Greenway, 1995). The impact of the wilderness effect is usually observed during extended wilderness trips, but I present evidence that Eco-Pagan campaigners living in small pockets of natural space are also deeply affected.

Although contemporary Paganism is often described as a “nature religion” (Pearson, Roberts & Samuel, 1998: 1), environmentally active Pagans are in “a minority” (Davy, 2004: 90) and ethnographic reports reveal “more emphasis on ritual ... than a connection, or interest even, in the environment” (Greenwood, 2005: 175). However, the term “eco-paganism” has emerged to describe earth-

based "spiritualities within the British protest movement" (Letcher, 2005: 556). Worthington claims that "[f]rom the beginning the road protesters demonstrated a raw, untutored form of grass-roots eco-paganism that went further than any previous protest movement in embracing the land as sacred" (Worthington, 2005: 214), while Butler (2003: 386) noted how "various expressions of 'spirituality'" united the otherwise diverse protesters at Claremont Road<sup>1</sup>. Although many protesters wouldn't call themselves "Pagan", boundaries blur between Eco-Pagan<sup>2</sup> and protester. A "Pagan discourse" underlies the protest movement (Letcher, 2000), and Plows confirms that a "sense of connectedness" is part of "a fairly 'standard' activist spirituality" which she describes as "practical paganism" (Plows, 1998: 209). Taylor asserts that the US radical environmental movement "can aptly be labelled 'pagan environmentalism'", and notes that each issue of the US *Earth First!* activist journal is dated by Pagan festivals (Taylor, 2001: 178). Given this context, I describe several of my participants as Eco-Pagans on the basis of their beliefs and practices even though they did not adopt that title themselves.

Some environmental activists spend months – or even years – living on protest camps. Because many of these camps are a response to schemes that threaten a specific organic environment, they are often on rural or wooded land; the Twyford Down<sup>3</sup> and Newbury<sup>4</sup> campaigns are notable examples. Protesters live in simple shelters called "benders" or tree houses and must be forcibly evicted before environmental destruction can take place.

There are many factors which lead protesters to spend months living in conditions which are at best basic and frequently uncomfortable or dangerous. Their dedication to the preservation of the environment is rarely grounded in intellectual considerations, although most are well aware of the factual arguments. More

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<sup>1</sup> Claremont Road was a key site of protest during the M11 Link Road campaign. Protesters were evicted in November 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Usage varies, but following Clysdale (2004: 86) I capitalise the term Eco-Pagan throughout.

<sup>3</sup> Twyford Down (Hampshire) was the site of a celebrated UK road protest campaign in the early 1990s. The motorway extension through the Down destroyed two Sites of Special Scientific Interest, two Scheduled Ancient Monuments & an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

<sup>4</sup> The Newbury bypass (Berkshire) was built during 1996 in the face of stiff resistance with over 1,000 people arrested and a policing bill of £26 million.

important is an embodied knowing grounded in their relationship with the places they defend. My fieldwork (below) will illustrate how that embodied knowing can be understood as an aspect of the wilderness effect.

Notions of embodied knowing have been discussed across many disciplines: the philosopher Merleau-Ponty refers to a “knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 144); sociologist Burkitt claims that “[a]ll knowledge is embodied and situated” (Burkitt, 1999: 74), and in an earlier article I refer to “somatic, physical knowing ... [that] is the knowledge of faith, of emotion, of the gut feeling” (Harris, 1996: 151). Cognitive neuroscience prefers the term “embodied cognition” and the second generation of this interdisciplinary field “begins with the realization that the body ... grounds and shapes human cognition” (Rohrer, 2007: 21-22).

A consensus has emerged that embodied knowing/cognition is largely non-verbal and pre-reflective and fundamentally tied in with location; it is situated. Perhaps most significantly for this discussion, embodied knowing/cognition reveals an integration between what we conventionally understand as “self” and “world”. Despite this consensus, work to weave the many disciplinary stands into a coherent pattern has barely begun. Later in this article I outline my own attempt to integrate the current research; I then use that model to interpret the fieldwork results I present below.

Because of the intimate relationship between “self” and “world”, place has a profound impact on our embodied knowing, and through that our entire being-in-the-world. I identified six processes which create a sense of connection to the organic environment,<sup>5</sup> all of which are grounded in embodied knowing. The wilderness effect is the most powerful of these, so though I occasionally refer to other processes of connection, I focus on that here.

## **Terminology**

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Embodied situated cognition and embodied knowing are perspectives on a single complex phenomenon that cannot be adequately understood from either viewpoint

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<sup>5</sup> These are: the wilderness effect (and similar intimate experiences of the organic environment), the felt sense (Gendlin, 1978), ritual (broadly defined), deep trance, meditation and entheogens.<sup>9</sup> Sex is also a powerful processes of connection and I do not suggest that this list is complete.

alone. A dance serves as a useful metaphor: we can analyse the choreography, music and physical execution of a dance, but this can't tell us how it *feels* to perform or watch it. Similarly we can interview the dancers, the audience and perhaps dance the steps ourselves, but we still won't understand how and why the choreography is effective. I thus adopt two complementary perspectives throughout: one focused on the phenomenological and experiential intimacy of embodied *knowing* and the other on the physiological body engaged in embodied situated *cognition*. My experiential analysis draws primarily on phenomenology and anthropology, while my more physiological perspective focuses on the cognitive science of embodied situated cognition.

## Methodology

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My involvement with the environmental protest movement spans over fifteen years and I was involved at the UK's first road protest camp at Twyford Down (1991-1994), the London M11 link road protest (1993-1995) and Newbury (1995-1996). This background gave me an understanding of protest site activism and helped build rapport with research participants. I have identified as an Eco-Pagan since at least 1990 and my insider status enabled a more empathetic approach to this research.

Participants were selected on the basis of practice and belief as much as self-identification as Eco-Pagans. Some participants resisted any attempt to define – and thereby limit – their spirituality, but did acknowledge “Paganism” as a suitable label for core aspects of their spirituality. Because there are very few protest camps in the UK at any one time, my ethnographic sample was self-limiting. I visited all of the then active protest sites in England, Scotland and Wales (2004-2007), and spent between a few days and several months at five of them. Most of the camps were in small areas of mainly deciduous woodland, usually on the edge of a town. Camp B<sup>6</sup> was my primary research site; I lived on-site full-time for three months (over winter 27/10/05) and spent approximately another six months there part-time. Camp B was unusual in that it was on a narrow strip of land which was part of a local park, but the patterns I found were apparent at every other site I visited.

Camp B was also notable in that it included an ancient burial site. The presence of

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<sup>6</sup> Camps are named alphabetically in the order I first visited them to preserve the anonymity of my participants.

the burial was significant for all the protesters there, if only for its tactical value to the campaign, but most people came and stayed for the sake of the natural environment. Eco-Pagans stress their relationship to what is local (Taylor, 2001) and have little interest in culturally identified sacred sites like Avebury, Glastonbury and Stonehenge. This is not typical of mainstream Paganism (Harvey, 2000: 159), but further discussion of why that might be lies beyond the scope of this article.

My research drew on existing ethnographic work (*inter alia*, Anderson, 2004; Butler, 2003; Letcher, 2001a & 2005; Plows, 1998; Taylor, 2001 & 2005), biographical accounts by activists (Hindle, 2006; Merrick, 1996; Plows, 2001), interviews, participant observation and my own autoethnography (Harris, 2008). Action Research (Reason & Rowan, 1981) and feminist methodologies (Harding, 1987) were influential on my methodology and I refer to those I interviewed as research participants in recognition of the collaborative approach I adopted.

I interpret this ethnographic material using my own model of embodied situated cognition which I call the *enactive process model* because it draws primarily on a cognitive neuroscience approach called enactivism (*inter alia*, Varela et al., 1991), and Gendlin's process philosophy (Gendlin, 1997). I explain this model and its context in a later section of this article.

## **The Wilderness Effect**

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Extensive research has shown that spending extended periods in the “wilderness” can have a profound impact on the psyche (*inter alia*, Greenway, 1995; Shaw, 2006; Key, 2003: 65). Changes engendered by what is widely known as “the wilderness effect” include a deeper connection to the environment and other people, a sense of freedom and an altered sense of self (Greenway, 1995: 128-132). All research into the wilderness effect concurs with Greenway that it has a “spiritual” dimension (Greenway, 1995: 128), and Key points out that there are “many examples” of spiritual experiences catalysed by wilderness (Key, 2003: 65).

To date the wilderness effect has only been noted in the context of extended wilderness trips, but ecopsychologists agree that “simply spending meaningful time communing with nature” (Shaw, 2006) is beneficial, and the full effect is a difference of degree rather than a difference in kind (Greenway, 1995: 132). We

would therefore expect that long periods in less than pristine wilderness would have a similar impact to short, intense wilderness exposure. My fieldwork shows that this is indeed the case, and most of the key aspects of the wilderness effect correlate closely with lived experience on a protest camp site: viz. a sense of deeper connection, a feeling of freedom and spiritual experiences.

The effect was first noted on North American wilderness treks and there are some fundamental differences between such treks and life on a protest camp. In most cases, the motives of those joining a wilderness trek will differ from those of protest site activists: wilderness trips are generally focused on personal therapeutic goals and any human-nature connection is a bonus (Baillie, 2006). As Shaw points out, there “is no guarantee that this process will lead directly or indirectly to environmental action” (Shaw, 2006). Clearly spending time in an organic environment does not *inevitably* make us more environmentally aware, but there is evidence that the wilderness effect can inspire and support activism (see “Motivation and the wilderness effect”, below).

I will now consider in more detail how key aspects of the wilderness effect – a sense of freedom, feelings of deeper connection, a distinct sense of self and spiritual experiences – were expressed on protest sites.

## ***Freedom***

Greenway describes the sense of freedom felt by those on a wilderness trek: “For many the wilderness experience means release of repression – release of the inevitable controls that exist in any culture” (Greenway, 1995: 128) and protest site campaigners commonly describe a similar feeling of freedom. My Camp B field notes of 12/12/05 attempt to put it into words:

I can't quite describe it, but have an image of Camp [B] as like a bubble, an enclosed safe, crazy-sane place. It's a bit like ELFS<sup>7</sup> actually – that same feeling of liminality, of freedom to be who you are, of safety and possibility.

Visitors often referred to the camp as a place “of freedom” as opposed to the world outside (quote from a visitor, field notes, 12/03/06, Camp B) and Merrick, a protester at Newbury, explains how that feeling of freedom allows for self-

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<sup>7</sup> ELFS is a annual week long Wiccan camp. I have changed the name for ethical reasons.

expression:

Not all far-gone behaviour is actually craziness; a lot of it is the release of tension that, in the outside world, people would be too inhibited to express (Merrick, 1996: 80).

Again my ethnography bears this out. In a discussion over breakfast, Jan,<sup>8</sup> who had previous experience of camp life and had lived at Camp B for about two months said: “I feel free here. I’m back to being myself”. Debbie, who had been at Camp B for about a month and who had also lived on a site before, responded that being there allowed her to “be who I really am”. She commented that her partner had ruefully said she had “the site bug again”. Jan went on to say that at the Camp she did things she didn’t normally do because she’s otherwise too shy, and added: “I don’t know who I am. When I’m here everyone knows who I am and it’s really affirming” (field notes, 14/11/06, Camp B).

### ***Connection***

For Greenway connection – or reconnection – is fundamental to the wilderness effect: “When entering the wilderness psychologically as well as physically, participants most often speak of feelings of expansion or reconnection” (Greenway, 1995: 128). A sense of connection lies at the heart of Eco-Paganism: one Eco-Pagan (Rob) explained that his “connection with the earth” had become “a major part” of who he is, while another (Jan) expressed it very explicitly: “That’s what Paganism is all about – connection with everything” (field notes, 11/10/05, Camp B).

Protest site activists typically build bender tents for living accommodation. These are constructed from flexible branches which are bent over and pushed into the ground. This structure is then covered with canvas and insulated with a layer of blankets or carpet. Living in a bender provides an intimate connection with the immediate environment which is why Eco-Pagan Ray doesn’t “want to live in a house, ever again”:

in a house [...] you’re just sealed off [holds hands up palm to palm in front of his head] from any – anything that could possibly connect with outside of it you know? Other than probably another box which is the television. Like you don’t realise it until – well I didn’t realise until I had the opportunity to live outside in a bender. [...] you hear the birds when you wake up in the

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<sup>8</sup> The names of participants have been changed unless otherwise noted.

morning and that's nice, [...] Sometimes you'll hear a wasp fly by or something [...] you kind of connect with what's outside of it, a bit more than you would in a normal home.

Ian had been living on protest sites for many months when I met him, and I asked if it felt different when he was in the woods. He smiled and said:

Does it feel different? No, it feels different when I'm not – when I'm in a box or on a street. That's when it feels different.

Similar experiences are described in autobiographical accounts of protest site life. Newbury activist Jim Hindle describes how he

became accustomed to the sound of the wind in the trees at all times. It wasn't a thing I necessarily listened to, but the silence that fell whenever I stepped inside a building was eerie and disquietening. ... It was like being connected to a great river, the source of all life ... and years of separation between us and the Land were falling away like an old skin (Hindle, 2006: 70-71).

This sense of connection often had a practical expression. Previous ethnographies described different degrees of environmental sensitivity amongst site Eco-Pagans, contrasting the respectful “practical paganism” of Twyford Down (Plows, 2001) with the insensitive rituals Letcher observed at Newbury (Letcher, 2001b). My own ethnographic research, which was more extensive than Letcher's, concurs with Plows, and I observed elements of Permaculture, extensive recycling and considerable sensitivity to local ecology amongst protest site Eco-Pagans.

Protest camp life has one significant extra factor which a wilderness trek lacks: those who live on the site are protecting it, and this enhances the sense of connection. As Jo explained:

you're giving your life over to try and protect that piece of land, so you have a more intimate relationship than you would, somewhere else [...] you've got that bond that you're trying to protect it, and I think it knows that you're trying to protect it, and it's your land because it's your home as well, and it's the home of the people that you share your life with.

Anderson notes that everyday life on a protest site creates “ties between self and place”, at least partly because of “heightened awareness of the local environment’s agency”, which “ties participants closer to their cosmological value systems as they experience at first hand unmediated positioning with a broader ecological system” (Anderson, 2004: 51). As Letcher says: “The very act of living out, however

dependent on wider society for food and so on, puts one in touch with nature in a way that is real, not virtual” (Letcher, 2000).

Several researchers have noted that the wilderness experience enhances sensory acuity (McDonald & Schreyer, 1991; Beck, 1987; Harper, 1995; Sewall, 1995) and this is apparent in my interview with Eco-Pagan Rob. In the city he has to engage sensory filters to “block out information, to block out noise, to block out the chatter of things [...] going into your mind, because if not you’ll go absolutely insane because there’s just so much going on...” On returning to a more natural space he would find the silence overwhelming and “it was so goddam quiet it almost hurt”, but this passed:

And it was only when you actually started to listen that you realised it wasn’t quiet at all but the river was flowing, the wind was in the trees, the birds flying. All of these things were going on which we weren’t hearing because we had these filters on. And I keep repeating it but it’s an important point, because people do live their entire lives in an urban environment and they just don’t get the connection, um they don’t get that connection with nature.

Many participants contrasted the connectedness they felt in the organic environment with what they perceived as the alienating effect of urban life. Lauren compared her old lifestyle with how she lived now:

It is very difficult when you come from this world, of time and meetings and writing things down. You get right out of touch with yourself.

After over a year living at various camps, Dave concluded that when we “shed all [the] stuff” of conventional life “it definitely lets the spiritual side of yourself come out”. Ray concurs with Dave’s conclusion:

in this day and age it’s just taken away from you [...] your mind’s just filled with so much other stuff – well, crap basically [...]. No-ones really in touch with what they actually are or anything, or life. [...] And if you start talking about, you know, the wind and the earth and the fire and the stars people just start laughing at ya [chuckles].

Several participants believed that this lack of understanding is endemic to Western life:

Sitting round the fire pit [...] explaining my research to Ian. Others chipped in. Ben said (approx): “It’s blatantly all connected. If you can’t see that it’s just because you’re closed down – conditioned” (field notes, 06/09/06).

Ian lamented that “We are bred not to get it”, while Adam told me that we are taught “from the womb” that “this is the way to live”, and social reinforcement is all around us “like smoke”. Adam contrasted this “psychic pollution” with a sense of “peace” that comes from being “grounded” in the embodied way of knowing that he feels in his stomach.

These descriptions of how a life closer to nature can open us to a deeper understanding are echoed in Greenway's suggestion that the wilderness effect enables a “de-conditioning of cultural 'programs'” (Greenway, 1997: 16). As we can see from the narratives above, this experience can be “a heavy shake-up: one's perception, dreams, perspective, awareness vividly and rapidly changes” potentially “to the point where people become more or less incapacitated when they return to their normal lives” (Greenway, personal communication). In fact, the return to civilization after a wilderness experience “is almost always a painful experience” (Greenway, 1995: 133) and the wilderness effect can place “the individual in more or less severe conflict with [urban] culture” (Greenway, 1995: 128).

Experiences of deep connection often illustrate the insight from cognitive neuroscience that “organism and environment enfold into each other” (Varela et al., 1991: 217). Rob described how he felt one evening in the woods when a deep realisation of environmental destruction came to him:

I felt like Gaia was really screaming out through me, saying please help me. Please help me, and like I started screaming myself and started saying these words. I felt so connected, so at one with the earth that this violence was being done towards me. Um, not me personally, any ego or anything like that, but me as in life, as in this whole unity which I'm connected with.

His identification with a sense of life itself, which is emphatically not his ego, is particularly striking and recalls Greenway's conclusion that the wilderness effect and other processes of connection “facilitate the arousal of nonegoic awareness” (Greenway, 1995: 133). As we have seen such experiences are not uncommon. Taylor found that “no small number of activists report profound experiences of connection to the Earth and its lifeforms” (Taylor, 2005: 47) while Eco-Pagan Jodie concluded that life in a camp constructed “a different form of consciousness whereby a person a felt a part of nature” (Greenwood, 2005: 107).

Several factors contribute to this sense of connection, including meditation, ritual,

the use of entheogens<sup>9</sup> and the wilderness effect. Although I focus on the wilderness effect here, there is a complex relationship between these different processes of connection. Greenway claims that “both the psychedelic and meditation experiences ... closely parallel” the experience of the wilderness effect, and that such awareness seems to have the “capacity to open consciousness to Mind – that is, to the more natural flows of information from nature” (Greenway, 1995: 132).

## *Sense of Self*

The wilderness effect creates a distinct sense of self:

People often are quite explicit about how their minds feel 'open' and 'airy' in the wilderness, as contrasted with 'turgid,' 'tight,' and 'crowded' in urban culture (Greenway, 1995: 132).

Anderson's field notes describe how it felt to live on site: “I get a slowed down, rhythmic feeling in the woods and on the meadow, relaxed” (Anderson, 2004: 51). Site life gave him “a sense of possibility, a blast of fresh air, oxygen rushing to the brain. These protests ... are like stepping into a parallel universe” (Anderson, 2004: 51). My own field notes echo Anderson's: “Feeling about being on site: Lightness, sense of openness” (field notes, 1/12/05, Camp B). I became especially aware of this sense when I left camp for a couple of days for a trip to London:

On the tube I feel more enclosed, less emotionally open, more restricted. We talk about urban congestion. It's not just roads that are congested – it's psyches (field notes, 4/11/05, Camp B).

Later I expressed a similar feeling as I left camp to travel by train to London:

As I sat down in this warm, enclosed space I felt odd – slightly shocked somehow. Now a few minutes later, it still feels strangely alien. Straight lines hard consistent surfaces. Ordered space. I feel shut away. I remember sensing a similar difference between cycling and being in a car: on a bike you're connected, part of the space you move through. In a car you're enclosed in a discrete space. I think that's the key to the difference. [...] the inside and outside are less defined. Even in my bender it's very obvious what the weather is like! There are no doors, very few straight lines and no order. The space is more open, inconsistent, and fluid. Sometimes it has an organic quality inspired by the materials; my bender is a dome, shaped purely by the relationship between bent hornbeam and the space (field notes, 14 /11/05, Camp B).

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<sup>9</sup> The term 'entheogen' refers to psychoactive plant or chemical substances when they are used in a sacred context (Ruck et al., 1979). All such substances can be used in a mundane context and the mental state of the user and the context are of fundamental importance (see Smith, 2000: 20).

Tuan (1974) noted how physical setting influenced perception and suggested that the straight lines of conventionally constructed space require different skills of perception than the organic complexity of a natural landscape. Given that research into embodied situated cognition (*inter alia*, Aydede & Robbins, 2009) has revealed a complex relationship between perception and sense of self, the phenomena Tuan observed may contribute to the wilderness effect.

### ***Spiritual Dimensions***

All research into the wilderness effect concurs with Greenway that it has a “spiritual” dimension (Greenway, 1995: 128), and Key points out that there are “many examples” of spiritual experiences catalysed by wilderness (Key, 2003: 65). In fact the development of Eco-Paganism amongst UK environmental protesters living in liminal temporary encampments is just the most recent manifestation of the spiritual power of place.

Eco-Pagans seek a sensual relationship with nature and the wilderness effect helps achieve what Letcher described as “an embodied sensitivity to nature” which is essential if we are to “come to know the 'genius loci' the spirit(s) of a place” (Letcher, 2001b). All my research participants linked their sense of connection with nature to their spiritual experiences and for most site Eco-Pagans the organic environment was essential to spirituality. This is apparent in much of what I have already reported, but Rob is typical:

I find it quite difficult to connect with my spirituality when I'm in an urban environment – It's only when I get out into nature ... and feel the energy flowing through me and I have that connection [...] the only way to understand it is to be out there and experience it.

Ray had “always been spiritual, about the love for the Earth” but he didn't “particularity have a religion” although he added that “Paganism is the closest that I've seen”. His spirituality had become “deeper” since he first came to live on a protest site partly, he suggested, because he had “lived outside now, near trees” and through meeting “people that are more spiritual” and getting “involved in some of the Pagan ceremonies”. Many Pagans find a name for a spirituality they already have, and Ray had “felt a very strong connection with the Earth” for many years, but had no name for the spiritual dimension of that feeling.

Lauren's experience was more complex, as for most of her life she'd avoided

religion and had “decided there wasn't such a thing as spirituality”. But when she began to visit the Twyford Down protest in the early 1990s, this began to change:

it was the first time I'd ever done chanting and drumming round a fire and I just loved it. Drumming and dancing and chanting round a fire! So fantastic, and spirit days and all that sort of stuff.

Although she later came to understand that these were spiritual feelings, at the time she “didn't want to know what it was, because it was something that I couldn't comprehend”. But her sense of discomfort grew as a “sort of spirituality was waking up” and she became “really scared because I didn't know where to go with it [...] because the only thing I knew was Church of England or Catholics or whatever, and I'd really just dismissed the whole lot of it”.

Lauren's spirituality grew out of a series of profound encounters with the organic environment which began at Twyford Down:

Twyford was such a *wonderful* piece of land. As you stepped onto it you just thought, 'What's happening to me?' And it was – I suppose it was in a way what first started it all but I couldn't cope with it. [...] the reason I think I had the breakdown was because it presented the real me to me and I just didn't recognise it or was able to cope with it.

Her experiences at Twyford were “just all to much” and she had a breakdown, but her spiritual sensibilities were to return over 10 years later when she arrived at Camp B:

When [Camp B] started it was to me exactly like Twyford Down. [...] I really wanted to go down there, and be part of this, [pause] but I didn't go because, I was scared. I was scared the whole thing would happen again.

Inevitably perhaps, Lauren started to spend time at the new site and one night her spiritual development “really crystallized”:

I was in a bit of a funny state anyway, because I'd had this really chilled out, sitting at [Camp B] [pause] and learning, I don't know, learning about the land again. Learning the power of the land? Something like that? And then, everyone had gone to bed – at least I thought they had – And I went down to the loo – the compost loo. [...] at night sometimes I didn't bother to drop the curtain 'cos I was usually in a hurry [laughs]. And as I sat there, I saw what I thought was a man. And I didn't realise it was anything at the time – I just thought it was somebody peeping at me while I was weeing, and my immediate thought was absolute annoyance and anger that somebody could look at me [...] so when I stood up and then I realised that it wasn't, and it was just as though it was this figure – there was this man. It led out of the afternoons talking, so I

was in that frame of mind and it was just this vision of this Green Man looking at me and it was as though it was just *calling* me, and I just felt [pause] frightened – shaky. [...] This huge figure, and I can only call it the Green Man [...] it had never really happened except that night when I sat at Twyford Down, [pause] I kind of had it. I call that one of my deep spiritual experiences sitting there that night when I knew I'd never be back there, just looking across that land, and I couldn't cope with that being destroyed.

As I was the only other person awake on site Lauren asked me to come and see the “figure in the tree by the toilet”:

We went back there together and she saw the figure as not frightening but protective. She said she believed the Earth is drawing people to protect Herself. Bit like the 'Rainbow Warriors' (her phrase). I laughed as she said in the same breath that she isn't spiritual! (Field notes, 05/07/06, Camp B).

After Lauren and I talked about it the next morning, I noted that:

For her the figure represents a spiritual presence defending [Camp B] and crucially somehow bringing her a message. She was more freaked out that it *wasn't* a human and that it was a spiritual experience. [...] When she came to see me in the communal [space] she was quite shaken. [...] [But not by the thought of a peeping tom.] It was actually the idea that there was a spiritual dimension. She admitted to me that she was afraid of the whole idea of the spiritual (field notes, 06/07/06, Camp B).

Lauren later told me that it was this experience “that really kicked me off with this whole spirituality Earth bit”, and inspired her to write a poem linking activism with “ancient” wisdom and the power of the Earth.

Two other participants experienced a similar spiritual emergence during the period of my fieldwork, and in each case the wilderness effect was fundamental. Although wilderness researchers have noted individual spiritual experiences, this is the first time a fieldworker has observed the emergence of a complex “nature based” spirituality in participants in any location. I arrived at Camp B within weeks of it being set up, so witnessed all the gradual changes that marked the spiritual growth of Dave, Ray and Lauren, and the latter's “Green Man” epiphany. Because I was experiencing the spiritual influence of the wilderness effect myself during the same period, I had an embodied understanding of the process. My research demonstrates how spiritual experiences catalysed by the wilderness effect – and related processes – have helped create the sub-culture I call protest site Eco-Paganism. This dramatic example of the power of place helps explain the growth of Eco-

Paganism. Although UK site Eco-Paganism emerged from the 1992 Twyford Down protest (Letcher, 2005: 556), it is found amongst environmental protesters in other countries, notably those spending time in wilderness (Shaw, 2006; Taylor, 2001).

### *Exceptions*

Almost all of the key aspects of the wilderness effect were found on protest camps and there are clear explanations for those few that were not. A wilderness trek frequently helps to break an addiction, but as social drinking is common on protest sites I would not expect alcohol addiction to be alleviated. Greenway notes “dramatic” changes in dream patterns during wilderness trips but these were not considered in my research (Greenway, 1995: 128-129).

Not everyone on protest sites shows as much respect for the places they live as the Eco-Pagans, nor does everyone develop a nature based spirituality. Clearly the wilderness effect does not influence everyone and other factors come into play. Although I did not interview activists who lacked a sense of connection, some of these factors were apparent, notably the influence of alcohol at Camps D and E:

It's great here right now, but Bob tells me it can change in a moment if the 'brew crew'<sup>10</sup> turn up. This is a major factor influencing any wilderness effect (field notes, 21/07/06, Camp D).

On more established camps there is often very little that needs to be done and boredom often leads to alcohol abuse. This was also apparent at Camp E:

When I arrived I heard [reports] of a lot of drunkenness on site. This [was] confirmed when I went over on Sunday morning to see 6-8 people drinking cider at 10 am. General reports of fighting, drunkenness and noise in the evenings. [...] Then in Sunday [night] things turned round: a fiddle player turned up and it was folk songs and tea round the main fire! Since then I've seen much less booze so things may be turning round (field notes, 05/07/06, Camp E).

Stringer and McAvoy noted four factors that inhibited spiritual experience in wilderness: not enough time alone, not enough time in general to “see, feel and/or experience processes”, “too large a group” and simply “not looking for spiritual

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<sup>10</sup> The 'brew crew' refers to mostly itinerant alcoholics who typically drink Carlsberg Special Brew lager which is 9.0% alcohol.

experiences” (Stringer & McAvoy, 1992: 69). All these would be inhibiting factors at protest sites which are often chaotic, sometimes include large groups and attract people with no interest in spirituality. Greenway opines that *intention* – a factor closely related to this last point – is the key to how powerful the wilderness effect is and observed that many people “carry” urban culture into the wilderness, meaning that they resist entering into it psychologically (Greenway, personal communication).

## **Motivation and the wilderness effect**

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Environmental campaigners are already committed to activism before they arrive on a protest site and this may have little or nothing to do with the wilderness effect. However, many activists who arrived on site for rational reasons soon become influenced by the power of place. Although all embodied cognition involves emotional engagement (*inter alia*, Damasio, 1994; 2003), Plows suggest that it is especially important for activists:

This is a crucial point in activist narratives as will be evidenced time and again in this chapter, the emotive, personal response – the facts are *felt* rather than merely understood (Plows, 1998: 173).

Plows notes several aspects of this powerful emotional motivation, all of which tie in with my own research findings and the wilderness effect in general. Plows found that “[s]ome kind of emotional, spiritual and/or aesthetic connection to *place* ... is often peoples’ first action trigger”. Respect for “nature, for animals, [and] for people” were also key motivating factors and this often “had a spiritual dimension”. Relationships with other activists, “ties formed under (often) extreme conditions” were also important (Plows, 1998: 208), and this correlates with research findings on the close relationship between place and community noted by wilderness researchers (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999: 38; Greenway, 1995: 129).

Some activists are initially motivated by rational reasons but develop the kind of *feeling* for the facts that Plows describes. Kate, a Newbury activist quoted in Merrick’s (1996: 128) autobiographical account of the protest, is a good example:

I am starting to forget myself why I first went down, but I know it was rationalised by well thought out arguments against the Car Culture. Now these arguments have been replaced by a belief system, an irrational commitment to the land, to the trees and to the people who fight to save them.

Lauren's experience is very similar. Her involvement with environmental activism began when she watched David Bellamy's television series *Turning the Tide* (Bellamy, 1987):

I watched and I thought if only half of what he's saying is true, why the fuck isn't anyone doing anything about it? [...] I just could not believe it and that's when I started getting active with Friends of the Earth, CND – people like that.

Given that Lauren is a retired teacher and “a very logical person” this rational rather than intuitive approach is to be expected. But, as explained above, the influence of protest site life changed her outlook dramatically and after her meeting with the Green Man she concluded that:

what was at Twyford Down is living on – it's turned up at [Camp B]. This feeling, this love of the land, is growing so much in people now. And that is what will win through in the end.

Her rational, logical motivation has been transformed into faith in the power of love for the land. Rob made the same transition, and described the process explicitly:

I tried for a long time, kind of getting up every morning and sort of reminding myself of the ethical issues that were at stake here and you know, trying to each day re-establish my conviction to do something, and I find that trying to do that on a rational level was insufficient to to – you know – to fulfilling my aims and giving me that energy. And over the past kind of year – couple of years I guess – I've really discovered how much energy one can invoke from nature, on a very intuitive level, [pause] and that I believe that is far more powerful and far more, um, deeply ingrained within oneself than simply rationalising it, and that's fundamentally based on experience and based on living essentially, yeah.

For Rob, Kate and Lauren reason becomes replaced by something ultimately far more powerful; an embodied spiritual understanding of connection to place. This experience may be far more common than we realise: Jane, one of Shaw's informants, was on an anti-uranium blockade near the Kakadu National Park<sup>11</sup> and explained how she “loved to observe the way the protesters from the cities down south would fall slowly into the rhythms of the land and be captivated by them” (Shaw, 2006). It is this embodied knowing of connection that inspires and motivates the “folk” spirituality I've described as protest site Eco-Paganism.

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<sup>11</sup> Kakadu National Park is situated 250km east of Darwin, in the Northern Territory of Australia.

Paradoxically perhaps, the wilderness effect does not require true wilderness to work its magic. Given that it works very powerfully on UK protest sites, it seems likely that it has the potential to catalyse profound transformation in the wider community. Greenway's evocative phrase that "civilization is only four days deep" (Greenway, 1995: 129) comes back to me, and I suspect it is even more fragile than that: removing just some of the trappings of the 21st Century can profoundly shift our awareness. My PhD research found that urban Eco-Pagans – who do not live on protest sites – developed a way of relating to the essence of sacred nature which functioned in a similar way to the wilderness effect. Over time, Eco-Paganism enhanced the urban practitioner's embodied awareness: urban Eco-Pagans learnt to become aware of how we think *with* and *through* the embodied situated self, and thus enhanced their embodied communion with places, flora, fauna. As well as being profoundly healing, these intimate local relationships patterned a sacred relationship to the world (Harris, 2008).

## Embodied Situated Cognition

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Although western culture privileges rational self-conscious thought, we intuitively know that our understanding is shaped by feelings that lie beyond the realm of "objective knowledge" and conscious cognition. Extensive research concludes that these processes are in some sense embodied. Although as yet there is no fully articulated epistemology of embodied cognition, a consistent interdisciplinary model is emerging, as researchers are apparently discussing the same phenomena from disparate but consistent perspectives.<sup>12</sup> A consensus has emerged that embodied cognition is situated and grounded in practical activity. This process is largely non-verbal and pre-reflective, and depends on an affective, sensual mode of being-in-the-world that reveals a fundamental integration between what we conventionally understand as "self" and "world". Because of the intimate relationship between "self" and "world", place can have a profound impact on our thinking and our entire being-in-the-world.

In his survey of the field Peterson notes that for a "significant number of researchers ... to understand the mind/brain in isolation from biological and environmental contexts is to understand nothing" (Peterson, 2003: 43). Although

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<sup>12</sup> I have reviewed the literature on this subject in detail elsewhere (Harris, 2008), so will simply refer to a few key thinkers here to give a sense of the breadth of the consensus.

the term Embodied Situated Cognition (ESC) emerged from artificial intelligence research it has come to describe an interdisciplinary field enabling advances in psychology, philosophy of mind and social interaction theory (Almeida e Costa & Rocha, 2005). For ESC researchers embodiment means “the body-in-space, the body as it interacts with the physical and social environment” and they conclude that it “is not just that the body shapes the embodied mind, but that the experiences of the body-in-the-world also shape the embodied mind” (Rohrer, 2006: 5).

When Merleau-Ponty articulated the phenomenology of the embodied mind he concluded that in knowing the world we become part of it, and thus the conventional subject-object distinction was illusionary. Abram applies Merleau-Ponty's work to develop an embodied environmental philosophy which understands the body as “a sort of open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the encompassing earth” (Abram, 1996: 62). Thus the immediate environment that meshes with our thinking and perception is participatory in that it always involves “the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives” (Abram, 1996: 57).

Gendlin develops Merleau-Ponty's ideas in a somewhat parallel way to show how *interaction* is more fundamental than perception: our perceptions function as part of our interaction with the world and so become part of how we behave in any given situation. The “body senses the whole situation, and it urges, it implicitly shapes our next action.” (Gendlin, 1992: 345). In everyday language we lack a language to name this body sense, but in the therapeutic practice of Focusing it is called the “felt sense” – an embodied tacit knowing that Gendlin describes as “a body-sense of meaning” (Gendlin, 1981: 10). Although Gendlin describes the felt sense as a “bodily sensed knowledge” (Gendlin, 1981: 25), we need to be clear that his approach requires “a new conception of the living body” as a *process* by which “the body means or implies” (Gendlin 1997: 19) such that the Gendlian “body” extends beyond the skin.

## **The enactive process model**

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Enactivism is currently the most fully developed model of ESC and emphasizes that what we conventionally think of as “subject” and “object” are co-arising. Varela and colleagues build on Merleau-Ponty's work to develop a model of cognition as “embodied action”, a process they call “enactive” (Varela et al., 1991:

xx). By emphasizing action they highlight that cognition is an aspect of the sensory body (Varela et al., 1991: xx) and that “knower and known, mind and world, stand in relation to each other through mutual specification or dependent coorigination” (Varela et al., 1991: 150).

Enactivism is consonant with other key thinkers: both Abram and Bateson (Bateson, 2000: 467) for example, have a fundamentally enactivist approach. Gendlin – a philosopher and psychologist – can be understood as an enactivist, although he does not identify as such. However, on Gendlin's conception “the body” extends beyond the skin into “a vastly larger system” (Gendlin, 1997: 26) in a way similar to the model offered by enactivism.

By combining enactivism with Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit, I synthesized a model of embodied situated cognition with more explanatory power than either has alone. Because it draws primarily on enactivism and Gendlin's process philosophy (Gendlin, 1997), I refer to it as the enactive process model<sup>13</sup>. The model integrates the work of several thinkers I have not introduced above, notably Clark's discussion of extended cognition (Clark, 1977), Lakoff and Johnson's embodied metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) and Gibson's Ecological Psychology (Gibson, 1979). We are still at an early stage in ESC research, and this is not an attempt to construct a comprehensive theory; I do, however, claim that this model illuminates my fieldwork and offers new insights for ecopsychology.

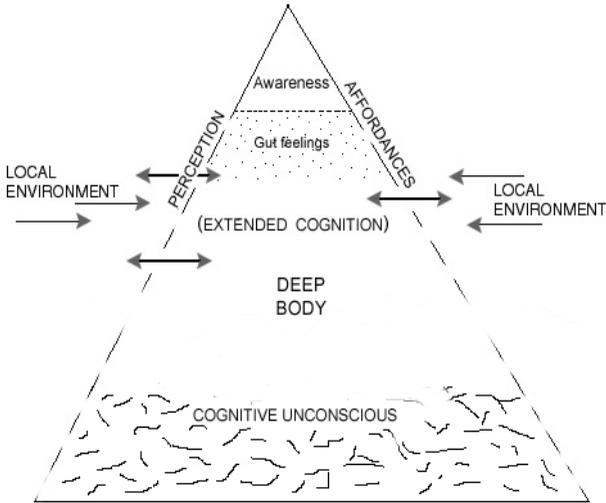
My “cognitive iceberg” diagram (figure 1) schematically illustrates the enactive process model. It is inevitably an oversimplification and presents the local environment and physical body as more separate than the enactive process model actually suggests.

In summary, the whole “iceberg” triangle represents the body-mind, with the “cognitive unconscious” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999: 10) in the lower section. The body-mind is engaged in a dynamic relationship with the local environment through extended cognition (inter alia, Chalmers & Clark, 1998; Clark 1977), perception and what Gibson calls “affordances” (Gibson, 1979). Cognitive neuroscience estimates that 95 percent of embodied thought occurs below our consciousness (Thrift, 2000: 36) so most of this processing never reaches everyday

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<sup>13</sup> I have explained this model thoroughly elsewhere (Harris, 2008) and can only present a somewhat simplified version here.

awareness, which is at the iceberg's tip.



**Figure 1. The cognitive iceberg: Everyday conscious awareness**

At the top of the triangle – the tip of the proverbial iceberg – is everyday conscious awareness, which is a very small percentage of who we are. Consciousness is simply what we are aware of, a minimal aspect of a complex system, but because we identify our “self” with consciousness we tend to discount the deeper processes that actually govern much of our behaviour. The level of awareness represented at the iceberg’s tip is usually focused quite narrowly and tends to heighten our impression of a subject/object distinction. Such awareness clearly has some survival value, but this “distinction making capacity” can become “hyperactive” and lead to “complete splits between different aspects of reality” (Greenway, 1997: 19).

The dotted area just below the apex designates “gut feelings” or felt senses. Further down the triangle, awareness widens out into what I call the *deep body*, becoming less focused and blurring the distinction between self and other, shown in the graphic by the gaps appearing in the sides of the triangle. This is the level where the process sometimes called extended or situated cognition operates (inter alia, Aydede & Robbins, 2009).

## **Embodied Situated Cognition and the wilderness effect**

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Shaw opines that the sense of connection at the heart of the wilderness effect is “an embodied visceral knowing that transcends the distinction between the inner and outer landscapes” (Shaw, 2006); in other words at the level of embodied knowing/embodied cognition, self and world become integrated and that process is central to understanding the wilderness effect.

Certain circumstances and techniques allow our normally shallow conscious to deepen, enabling us to become more aware of the blurred boundary between self and world. This process can be illustrated using the cognitive iceberg diagram. Most of the time we are unaware of the deeper processes of ESC: as shown in figure 1, our consciousness is focused at the narrow tip of the iceberg. But at other times our normally shallow awareness begins to slide down the cognitive iceberg into the deep body, sometimes bringing a sense of expansion and a blurring of the boundaries between self and world.

This process is apparent in even quite ordinary circumstances: Leder vividly describes on an occasion when he was walking in the woods, caught up with his own concerns:

a paper that needs completion, a financial problem. My thoughts are running their own private race, unrelated to the landscape. ... The landscape neither penetrates into me, not I into it. We are two bodies (Leder, 1990: 165).

On my model, Leder's awareness is focused at the tip of the cognitive iceberg and he is caught up the familiar dualistic mode of experience our culture considers normal.

But the “rhythm of walking” and the peace of the wood calm his mind and induces an “existential shift”, so that he begins to notice the beauty around him. Gradually

[t]he boundaries between the inner and the outer thus become porous. ... I feel the sun and hear the song birds both within-me and without-me. ... They are part of a rich body-world chasm that eludes dualistic characterization (Leder, 1990: 165-6).

Leder's awareness has slipped down the cognitive iceberg, broadening out into the deep body and this change in “body-mind-habitus” produces “an altered sense of self” (Jackson, 2006: 328). A fundamental aspect of this change in habitus is the

deepening sense of personal embodiment which results from shifting awareness down the cognitive iceberg. This shift blurs the distinction between self and world, enhancing Leder's sense of connection. The experience Leder describes correlates with the wilderness effect, which as we know is the result of "spending meaningful time communing with nature" (Shaw, 2006).

It is this slide down the cognitive iceberg that – at least partly – explains the power of the wilderness effect. As Greenway and others have noted, the wilderness effect brings "a shift from culturally reinforced, dualism-producing reality processing to a more nondualistic mode" (Greenway 1995: 131). Although "consciousness remains", it is no longer dominated by "the need-crazed egoic process (especially the making of distinctions)". What remains is "a simpler, 'nonegoic' awareness" which can "open consciousness ... to the more natural flows of information from nature" (Greenway 1995: 132). This is exactly what we see on the enactive process model: when our awareness slides down into the deep body, consciousness remains but we can sense that the "organism and environment enfold into each other and unfold from one another in the fundamental circularity that is life itself" (Varela et al., 1991: 150).

## **Conclusion**

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This article makes two significant claims: first that the wilderness effect affects activists living on UK protest camps and second that embodied cognition is fundamental to how the wilderness effect works. I demonstrated the first point by reference to my fieldwork and other ethnographic accounts. I illustrated how key aspects of the wilderness effect were expressed; viz. the emergence of a new sense of freedom, feelings of deeper connection, a changed sense of self and spiritual emergence. I then explained how the deeper sense of connection and closely related spiritual experiences enhanced activist motivation.

I then briefly introduced several theoretical approaches to embodied knowing/cognition and set out my enactive process model, graphically illustrated by the cognitive iceberg diagram. The enactive process model model helps explain how spending time in the organic environment can lead to a profound awareness of the fundamental connection between what we conventionally perceive as self and world. This shift in awareness underpins many aspects of the wilderness effect, notably the "shift from culturally reinforced, dualism-producing reality processing

to a more nondualistic mode” (Greenway 1995: 131).

The implications of this research for ecopsychology are two-fold: first, the influence of the wilderness effect is far more widespread than previously thought; second, my enactive process model contributes to the theoretical underpinning for this evolving discipline. Given that the wilderness effect has a powerful and largely beneficial affect, we would do well to encourage its influence; by applying the insights offered in this article we can do just that.

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## **Correspondence**

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Dr Adrian Harris

*Web:* <http://www.adrianharris.org/>