



HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	Learning Destination Wellbeing through Walking
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Citation	CATS 叢書, 18, 36-44
Issue Date	2024
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/93803
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	CATS18 (4).pdf



Learning Destination Wellbeing through Walking

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Keywords: the land, the country, listening, soundscape, connection
ecohumanities, destination, wellbeing

Introduction

I'm honoured to be here and especially taking walking as a mode of learning, thinking and discussing tourism. I'd like to thank Johan-sensei and his great team sincerely for initiating this innovative and challenging, but very enjoyable collective learning opportunity for all of us. I am Kumi Kato from the Faculty of Tourism, Wakayama University and also Happiness Institute, Musashino University. I am the Co-President of ISA RC50 (the International Sociology Associations's RC50 conference held next year (2025) in June), and the EarthCheck Research Institute. I am also an affiliate to UQ and Griffith University in Australia where I previously taught before starting with Wakayama in 2008.

Today, as **walking** is a stream of movement, I'd like to present a stream of **keywords** that have inspired me over the decades drawing on some of the examples of the works I was fortunate enough to be engaged with communities in Australia and in Japan.

My current work centers around "sustainable destination management and policy" and I run seminars and training for destination managers, DMOs and policy makers, which could be quite *Outcome-focused* rather than *Process-oriented* and reflective, and this is my attempt to bring in much more fundamental to destination management discourse. Before talking about **Destination**, we have to understand the **Land**.

The Land

I just returned from Australia two days ago, and Brisbane, where I had previously lived over 20 years, belongs to Turrbal/Jagara people, and their land or Country is called *Meanjin*. As Indigenous Australian tradition, and acknowledging what Johan sensei and Naraki san taught us on the first day, I'd like to acknowledge:

...the traditional custodians of the land on which we have gathered and walked over the last few days, paying respect to their elders, past and present, and acknowledge their long tradition of teaching through sharing their connections with country, community, language and culture, stories and lived experiences.

The Country

Acknowledging the land is perhaps the most important learning I received during my time in Australia, from scholars, writers, artists, poets, practitioners and people who generously shared their stories.

One of my mentors who spent days and years with indigenous communities wrote:

.... the country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place..... Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life (Rose, 1996, p. 7)

Davidson, another writer who walked 2700km on camel back across Australia in the 1980s, described a "Beautiful and barren country" or a lyrical portrait of the "Sunburnt country" in Dorothea Mackellar's 1906 poem "My Country" (1980).

Australian land/country is in my mind the red soil of Uluru, intensely blue sky and the ocean, bursting smells of gum trees and wildflowers, petrichor (the sandy smell of rain in hot summer day), the laughing bird kookaburra at the dawn, lyrebirds echoing across the valley, or owl's calls in the distance, or kangaroo quietly watching on a wide plain. Acknowledging the land was also to listen to the land, which became a methodological approach for some of my research projects.

Listening

Listening is a practice that awakens our senses to become more receptive to *More than Human*. The concept perhaps is already present in the Japanese concept of *Kiku* [聞く], as it represents much more than simply catching sound through the ears but it is an act of “attending to something mindfully with all of our senses”. I’d like to bring two examples of listening based research –

*ONE is a “Listening Gardens” created in Australia, three of them - one in wild forest, and two in urban parks. The forest one resulted from working with a community in Tasmania, committed to saving the forests from the very destructive development.

In the process of creating a garden, the community outrage/protests gradually turned into a series of celebrations. This was empowering for the community, as we found strength in listening to the land, playing music and reading poetry as a statement how so important the land and forest were for the community.

Another related to a group of women divers, ama, in Shima region in Mie. I was taken by the sound of *Isobue* [磯笛] or sea whistle, which is the sound of breaths the women take in between dives. But the sound represented the women’s ethical engagement with the sea and their sensory way of knowing the environment.

They were observing the massive changes of the ocean environment. They were clearly aware of the illegal operation surrounding them, but they kept strict rules and restrictions on their own harvesting, and never used oxygen tanks or other technological equipment, as they believed it would lead to overharvesting and disconnect their sense of connection with the ocean environment. The simple method of diving did not change since the time it was described in *Makura no Soshi* [枕の草子 - a book written by gentlewomen Sei Shonagon at the imperial court more than 1000 years ago].

This story became a radio documentary *Waiting for the Tide* (Kato - ABC Australia 2007) with my own narration, which is still available on the ABC website if you are interested. Here’s a few sentences from the story.

The fishery union estimate the catch declined to almost 1/10 in the last 20 years. Excess harvesting, illegal diving, pollution, erosion all caused this decline. For women, the word rankaku is like a curse, they repeatedly say, “So that we can come back tomorrow. So that we can come back next year”. Isobue, sea whistle, symbolises the women’s ethics to the ocean’s blessings they receive. They rely on their own physical limit, their senses, their

beliefs, and their connection with the mythology.
Out of such sensory engagement with a place emerges a concept of Soundscape.

Soundscape

Soundscape ‘helps humans to recognise their place in relation with the surrounding’ (Casey, 1996), and it generates a **sonic sense of place** that restores/cultivates connectivity with the more than human. This sonic way of knowing is referred to as **Acoustemology, or sonic epistemology** in Steven Feld’s work being in a Kaluli rainforest in PNG.

Acoustemology allow us to “**be with and know with the environment**” as the sound lets us hear interdependencies of the invisible world, which we are part of” (Voegelin, 2024).

Sensing the invisible and indivisible is perhaps what we have been doing through walking. **Being part of invisible and sensing connection** is what we may call spirituality, which is perhaps what I was pursuing in my work. This is also why I found Naraki san and her team’s presentation on the first day so powerful.

Here, as a last example, I’d like to draw on the story of wolves in Iitate mura, Fukushima, some 50 km away from the now defunct Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant or 1F.

The story concerns with a restoration of some 240 wolf paintings on ceiling panels in a shrine that was lost in fire during the evacuation. This is a story of attempting to restore connection with the land.

Connection

Japanese wolf – was believed to be a messenger of mountain god, which comes down to the village during the farming season, and return to the mountain at the end of the season. They are invisible as we only **hear their howls** in distance and **sense their being** in the deep mountain inaccessible to humans.

Although wolves are regarded as a “scary bad guy” but none of the folktales I researched had such description. Rather, they were revered as a spiritual being, who also protected humans from disasters and misfortunes. One folk song in Yoshino, Nara praises wolves as a protector that brings good harvest to the community.

The last Japan wolf hunt was recorded in Yoshino, Nara, in 1905 that was the same year the original wolf ceiling was completed. The project started in 2012 as I was drawn to the

fact that wolves once revered as a mountain god were made extinct and now watching over the villages inhabitable to humans.

Restoring the lost wolf ceiling was a form of regaining spiritual connection with the land for the community who finally were allowed to return in 2017, but still only a quarter of the population have returned to the village. (1300 out of the 6500)

Scientific name for the Japanese Wolves is *Canis lupus hodophilax*, a path guide, who accompany people home, so I'm hoping that the wolves will walk people home again.

Ecohumanities

The approach that supported me through these works is Ecohumanities, which is now the basis for my tourism thinking that also belong to Critical Tourism Studies (Ateljevic, 2020).

Ecohumanities is defined as an inter-discipline which emerged specifically to address the fact that current ecological crisis, including extinctions, degradation and climate change, are anthropogenic, originating from the nature/culture divide. These ideas resonate with the foundational teaching of environmental ethics, such as Aldo Leopold's Land Ethics, which claims: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (Leopold, 1949)

Back in 2008, we "ecohumanitarian activists" issued a manifesto for living in the anthropocene, as a result of a thinking retreat just like this conference. It says:

Our thinking needs to be in the service of life—and so does our language.

This means giving up preconceptions, and instead, listening to the world.

This means giving up delusions of mastery and control, and instead, to see the world as uncertain and yet unfolding.

Our thinking needs to be - Curious; Experimental; Open; Adaptive; Imaginative; Responsive; and Responsible. We are committed to think **with** the community of life and contributing to its healing (Gibson et al., 2015, ii).

The guiding principles of ecohumanities are: *connectivity*, *connectedness* or *being connected* (Weir, 2008), arguing that "the imperative of learning to think about and with connectivity can expand the boundaries of thought and thinking itself – to enhance our ability to think in dialogue and, perhaps, in empathy with others".

The Ecohumanities perspective also challenges the boundaries and divides that are

prevalent in academia, and the ranking of knowledge systems that impedes “our capacity for knowledge sharing. Inclusiveness, Connectivity, and sense of reciprocity will challenge the hierarchical division of knowledge, and embrace more diverse ways of knowing and expressing, which should be fundamental in all forms of learning.

Destination

Now finally about the destination – by now, our attention may have shifted from “we/us” to “Land, Country, Listening, sensory knowledge” – Shifted from **Anthropocentric** to the “Earth-centric. With this, the language of Destination and Management now feel rather imposing and arrogant. This is where we should start. Such awareness shift should be mandatory for mandatory for all tourism practitioners, policy makers and managers before considering any part of “visitor economy”. And then we may consider destination wellbeing.

Wellbeing

Wellbeingⁱ in tourism is often interpreted as visitor wellbeing, or more narrowly physical and mental wellness of the visitors, but with shift of our awareness, the concept becomes more holistic, inclusive of environmental, social as well as economic wellbeing of the destination – the land. Contributing to the Destination Wellbeing, is the essence of Regenerative Tourismⁱⁱ.

What should be emphasised here, and what I always ask people in destination

ⁱ Common definition of wellbeing centers around “human” – our health, happiness, prosperity and integrity, but what we need to acknowledge is that this depends on the health, happiness, prosperity and integrity of a place, and of those community of being including animals, plants, and all the elements, also the people residing with us, and future generations to whom these land the seas will be passed onto. WHO (1946) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Seligman (2018) identifies five measurable elements – PERMA that make up wellbeing, which are: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationship, Meaning and Purpose, Achievement, Accomplishment.

ⁱⁱ Regenerative tourism/travel (EarthCheck Research Institute, 2023) is “a process where tourism sector stakeholders, collectively, exert care and guardianship (through decision-making and practices) for the improvement and enhancement of natural, human and human-made elements when moving to, visiting, living or operating in a destination” (EarthCheck, 2023).

management seminars, is the locally specific knowledge about the place - a word, a phrase, saying, song, dance, or story that tell us how we may live with the specific place as they support integrity, resilience and thus sustainability of a place. This may be called Traditional Ecological Knowledge, folk wisdom, and respecting place or destination wellbeing in tourism context should be a priority.

I often get rather blank look, and I fear loss of such senses and knowledge may be a bigger threat than many of the ecological crisis itself today. Without it, we won't be able to recognise or articulate wellbeing of a place.

Conclusion

This mode of learning, shifting our attention from “us” to “*earth others*” and “*more than human*”, from “*how we feel*” and “*what we see*” to “*how the Land sees us and feels us*”.

This gives us a different perspectives and scale, turning a destination into a land / place / country, from management to engagement. It also allows us to understand our own vulnerability, sensitivity and strength.

Walking is a great mode of learning for this, and I'd like to suggest this walk / think / discuss mode of learning to all those involved in tourism

Finally, if you want to keep walking, we have a Kumano kodo pilgrimage walk 3-6 January, to which you are all welcome to join. It will be four days of walking, thinking, discussing, while we enjoy onsen and local hospitality.

As the Kumano deities represents past, present and future, it is guaranteed to be a “rebirth” experience. The program has run over ten years with a help of local communities, and I'm hoping that our pilgrimage can be another tourism learning journey associated with this walking conference.

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