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# Fostering Connection Through Ecological Identity: Expanding Colonial Concepts of Outdoor Adventures

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Fostering Connection Through Ecological Identity:  
Expanding Colonial Concepts of Outdoor Adventures

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### Abstract

How can I foster ecological identity? Defining ecological identity as a sense of awareness of how one relates with nature, and identity as an ecological being that is nature, this action research project will explore the ways in which people connect to the natural world through everyday moments. In understanding that the foundations, practices, and industry messaging of the outdoors can be exclusive and perpetuate systems of oppression, I am seeking to expand the notion of what nature connection can be. The hope is to create more accessible, inclusive, and equitable outdoor education practices. Research design included a survey and short, accessible nature activities. The nine participants offered feedback as to ways they felt their connection to nature was inhibited, which could be incorporated into changes in program design and language within Outdoor Education.

Keywords: connection, nature, ecological, identity

Fostering Connection Through Ecological Identity:  
Expanding Colonial Concepts of Outdoor Adventures

As a person and a professional, I have always been drawn to the natural world, and incorporated it into my days and my work whenever possible. Connection to nature, from a very young age gifted me many things—a sense of awe, inspiration, learning and adventure—and it has only been in recent years that I have come to value the lifelong role that nature has played in supporting my health. Health is a value I have consciously chosen to orient much of my life around in recent years. The mental health boost I receive from a splash in the ocean, the vitality I feel throughout a walk in the forest, the healthy relationships that can form and grow on a multi-day expedition and the spiritual connection I feel when watching the sun rise on a new day are just a few examples of the health that nature has fostered in me.

While in Aotearoa/New Zealand, I was working with Māori people who would introduce themselves using the Pepeha (Pepeha, 2000). They would go on to explain that the Pepeha is significant to Māori, as it is a traditional way of greeting that shares the places and people that are most important to them. When translated from Te Reo to English, the greeting shares your mountain, your river—from where you grew up—your family, your tribe, and your name. It is shared in remembrance that everyone is connected and given the small size of Aotearoa (New Zealand), ancestral connections are commonly made when sharing Pepeha. The concept of introducing yourself and sharing your mountain and your river struck me and I have often honored it in my outdoors practice. I find it to be an accessible way for students to connect to a natural space that holds importance for them, to offer a grounding in connection to earth that can feel tangible and personal, locating them in a space, and can potentially open up connections with others who share that mountain or river “felt sense.”

In appreciating the beauty of the Pepeha in outdoors contexts, this practice has felt like a way of connecting to self and to the earth in a way that I believe is accessible to all, not just those who regularly connect with the earth through outdoor pursuits. Given my desire to foster connection to nature with all people, I believe sharing the Māori tradition of the Pepeha and ask-

ing people to recall their mountain and their river is an opening to fostering a sense of connectedness to themselves, to others, and to the natural world.

In opening a door to connection with the Pepeha, I would like to further develop ways to enhance ecological identity in my practice. The purpose of this study was to develop an awareness of sense of self, sense of place, and sense of connection within my practice and within the community in which I practice, with the hope of more connection bringing positive physical, mental, and emotional health benefits. This idea is inspired by the field of ecopsychology, which critically examines:

Western nations' common disconnection from, and domination of the Earth and peoples who live in close harmony with nature. Its pertinent critical analysis serves as a foundation for fundamental worldview change or awakening, or rather re-awakening, to inherent bonds with the natural world . . . . Revealing this disconnection with nature and a deeper self and reintegrating into healthy relationship with the natural world (including humans), ecopsychology provides a path of restoration between the small self of the individual and the larger Self of the world. (Davis & Canty, 2013, pp. 1–2)

Ideally this study will help broaden the concepts of what connection with the natural world can be and encourage people to incorporate some of these practices more mindfully into their daily lives. I would also hope that this study can offer an expanded sense of belonging to the natural world for a more diverse audience. The literature review and my own experience has shown that outdoor experiential education (OEE) historically and presently operates from a colonial approach and can feel unwelcoming to those with marginalized identities or people who have felt shame or exclusion from the outdoors. A lack of technical skills, ability, gear, and finances can be the source of this feeling of exclusion, in addition to the failing of media, culture, and industry-driven body image ideals to represent a diversity of folks connecting with the outdoors.

The project is situated within the role of Graduate Assistant at the Outdoor Adventures department at the University of San Diego; however, as the action researcher, I bring with me my lifetime of experiences within experiential education as student and educator. As such, ter-

minology used within this project will encompass outdoor adventures (OA) and outdoor experiential education (OEE) interchangeably to reference programs operating as experiential education programs oriented around the outdoors, or nature.

### Background

The foundations of OEE are rooted in colonial attitudes (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Rose & Paisley, 2012; Warren et al., 2014; Warner & Dillenschneider, 2019). The concept of using wilderness settings as a location for creating challenging experiences, to result in personal and group transformation for the better, erases the reality of Indigenous peoples living in harmony with the land for tens of thousands of years prior to the arrival of colonial settlers and violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land (Clement, 2019; Rose & Paisley, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012.). This concept also overlooks the connection with land and the Indigenous wisdom and skills passed down through generations that First Peoples have been cultivating for thousands of years prior to dispossession. OEE in many contexts attempts to recreate connection, knowledge, and skills with the land in a way that is “superior” to Indigenous connection, wisdom, and skills, playing out what Tuck and Yang (2012) refer to as settler nativist fantasies.

There are many complex and nuanced factors that combine to result in the dominance of Whiteness in OEE. Johnson (1998) explored the history of what wildland spaces have represented to Black folks, and a potential reluctance to recreate in the outdoors given the collective memory of slavery, lynching, and sharecropping. Although the lack of racial diversity in OEE has been acknowledged for some time (Warren, 2002), efforts to shift this dynamic have still come from a largely colonial lens. Rose & Paisley sum this up well: “The dominance of White privilege is well-established in experiential education, and simply encouraging more racially diverse participant groups amounts to a benevolent invitation for “others” to take part in processes and institutions already well under way without them” (2012, p.142).

The Whiteness of outdoor education is one of many exclusionary factors. Programs and gear are commonly designed to reinforce and reward the participation of people with privileged identities—male, cis-gender, straight, middle-class, strong, slim, and able bodied—which can

result in people holding these identities experiencing themselves as “standard.” This norm that is created by outdoor experiential education is often unconsciously recreated by instructors and within program, clothing, and gear design, resulting in OEE perpetuating systems of advantage and failing to be an inclusive and diverse space for all (Barnfield & Humberstone, 2008; Clement, 2019; Rose & Paisley, 2012; Warner & Dillenschneider, 2019; Warren, 2002). This creates cultural, social, and political barriers for people holding marginalized identities feeling unwelcome in the outdoors. Warren and Dillenschneider (2019) noted that participant demographics continue to reflect the dominant culture, even with awareness and efforts toward improving equity in OEE.

To address socioecological challenges that are overwhelmingly present in today’s world, an understanding and practice of social justice in all education is needed. Rose and Cachelin (2014) are quite clear that there is a need to shift current educational practices given that they are proving ineffective at inspiring students to take up their roles as citizens who have power in decisions and actions around justice, sustainability, and equity. They feel there is strong hope in OEE and maintain:

Outdoor education has powerful potential in this role given the justice-oriented democratic spaces generated in programs. In this sense, unmasking oppression as an explicit outdoor/experiential education goal calls on us to take a broader view of our own roles in globalized socio-ecological systems. (Rose & Cachelin, 2014, p. 9)

Unmasking oppression within experiential education is a goal to which I am fully committed in my educational and leadership practice, and in an effort to ground myself in achievable, tangible practices to work toward that goal, I have taken inspiration from Emergent Strategy ([Brown, 2017](#)). I believe enhancing ecological identity is an intentional, small step in the direction of expanding my own and others view of our roles in socioecological systems. By locating myself within a place, with awareness of my community, the mutual influence between myself and my community engages me in an understanding of my role as nature, inspiring me to care more deeply and proactively for the extension of myself that is the natural world. Rosekrans (2017)

detailed his personal journey to discovering his ecological identity and believes if one can see all beings as their relations, a deeper sense of empathy and responsibility can develop resulting in people taking more care with the planet and their relations. Irwin (2013) offered similar thoughts in connection to justice, saying, “Any discussion about a sustainable future must turn to identity, for the ways we live in the world is defined by how we perceive ourselves within that world” (p. 1).

Rose and Cachelin (2014) believed it is the work of outdoor educators to “bring the far-away nearby” (p. 7) and awaken students to engage in addressing the challenges we face as individual humans, as part of a local community and as actors in a global ecological community. This concept of the “faraway nearby” is one for which I am striving, and in connecting folks to their daily interactions with nature through sensory connections, I believe awareness of ecological identity will reveal the faraway that is actually very nearby and even within us.



## Context

Outdoor Adventures (OA), as an organization within the University of San Diego, began in 1986 and has grown significantly in this time. The two main functions around which OA orients are the Guide Development program with around 60 student guides, and a Pre-O program that offers up to 100 incoming first-year students a multi-day camping experience focused on community building and creation of a sense of belonging for new students. Additionally, OA offers between 18–28 trips a semester, from day trips to multi-day expeditions. OA also serves as an outdoor gear rental hub for staff and students at USD. OA is committed to the following pillars: Student Leadership, Experiential Learning, Personal Development, Group Involvement, Service, and the Natural Environment and Spirituality. Here OA also operates from a commitment to their Affirmation of Diversity statement which offers that OA seeks to include a diverse group of participants in the program—that all programs are open to all undergraduate and graduate students regardless of experience or ability in the wilderness, as the guides will teach all skills that are required.

My past three predecessors in the role of Graduate Assistants (GA) for OA have all conducted action research in areas linked to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and these principles are demonstrated in inclusive policies, practices, and language that have been recommended by the previous GA's and are now standard in guide training. Such practices include introducing pronouns, gender-neutral language, disrupting gendered expectations within roles and adaptive instructions for those less able or confident. Additionally a “no put-down” policy, diversity training for guides, traditional land acknowledgement, and education on the land practices and history of traditional owners of the land we recreate on is considered standard OA trip practice.

Although OA as an organization and community are committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion, staff and students of OA are aware that there is historically and presently strong associations or perceptions as to who OA is for. Through structural programming and media messaging, OA often sends messages that the outdoors are for White, straight, affluent, able bodied, cis-gender males. The demographics of who is currently a part of the OA community is

overwhelmingly White, cis-gender, able-bodied folks. We do have a majority of female identified folks, a spectrum of sexual orientation represented, and a variety of financial backgrounds. I believe the diversity present is due to the inclusive philosophies and policies of OA; however, we need to do better. As a Graduate Assistant, equity, diversity and inclusion are important to me, as is one of my foundational values of health, and I believe micro-inclusions within the natural world can be experienced by anyone regardless of identity. This can lead to more awareness of opportunities for connection. My use of the term “micro-inclusion” is intentional; in part, recognition of microaggressions that in recent years have come more into the realm of public consciousness. This has been a helpful step toward recognizing and addressing injustice. My hope with the idea of micro-inclusions with nature is that tiny moments of connection and awareness of nature can become an almost unconscious, cumulatively positive connection that can lift folks and offer regular reminders of this connection.

A significant barrier to reaching a more diverse community is the exclusivity that is perpetuated within the department name of Outdoor Adventures (OA) and whom similar organizations have traditionally served. Another significant barrier in my perception is an organizational value barrier. With OA falling under the umbrella of the Campus Recreation department, OA is required to orient programming around revenue—it must sustain the operation by generating its own income. This limits programming opportunities, which are often aimed at meeting the needs of participants who will commit and pay for the program, which generally targets those who feel fairly welcome in the outdoors. OA runs free or subsidized programs for those less financially able; however, the majority of programming must be designed to sustain the organization. As a student in the field of Student Affairs, this speaks volumes as to how OA education is perceived, and valued, from the University standpoint as well as general educational views and values of western culture in my experience and understanding. With my experience as a practitioner with in Health and Physical Education, Outdoor Education, and now in OA, the value placed by the institution upon awareness of the body and knowledge as a whole-body experience is demoralizing at best and rooted in systemic injustice at worst. The brain cannot function without the

body, and demotion of the body within an academic setting impacts how the entire University community values health. Academic “health” is inherently tied to physical, mental, and spiritual health. The parallel with the demotion of the “outdoors” as lower ranking in the hierarchy to the classroom can be seen with environmental health—value is placed on being inside and physically comfortable. I do believe the comfortable classroom context has enormous value; however, I believe the resources being poured into the classroom setting as opposed to the resources (e.g., time, energy, creative problem solving, money) being put into sustaining the natural environment is a stark contrast, and evidence of this imbalance is becoming apparent in our global environmental health.

The topic of ecological identity arose for me throughout my years of realizing connection to nature, which creates in me a deeper connection to self, and greater connection to humanity. With greater awareness of myself as an ecological being in relation to other living organisms, including the plants, animals, and my community of fellow humans; I more consistently experience feelings of calm and connection. When sleeping outside for a few nights or walking in a drizzly forest I am quite sure that these experiences benefit my health—physically, mentally, spiritually, and socially - in significant ways. I am hoping to enhance my own and my communities’ awareness of and capacity to develop ecological identity as one that can transcend some of the racial, gendered, ableist, heteronormative, elitist and classist barriers that can present in the “Outdoors.”

#### Methodology I

McNiff (2016) defined epistemology as a particular way of knowing and Schon (1983) suggested that action research requires a new epistemology, a way of knowing that sees everything related to everything else. In enhancing ecological identity, I hope to foster a way of knowing of oneself as being related to everything else and so action research is a complementary form of study for this particular inquiry.

Within this research style, I chose to incorporate a mixed methods approach. I chose a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to capture the more finite and measurable

facets with the ineffable and intangible elements of identity. My intention in using a mixed methods approach was to gather a broad spectrum of data that will be influential in helping me understand the insight participants have of their own understanding of ecological identity. Using surveys, short nature activities, and reflective prompts and journaling, my hope is to create accessibility for communication in a variety of formats to capture data from a wide range of folks.

Action research is a well-suited form of research for the theme of ecological identity as there are parallels in creating awareness. The concept of action research is to realize the researcher as a significant part of the research and awareness of their impact within the project. Within ecological identity, my hope is to generate awareness of participants' own role and relationships within nature, that is continual and ongoing and influential whether they are paying attention to it or not and to encourage more intentional energy around our roles as agents of ecological change. McNiff (2016) offers that one of the elements of action research is the need to interrogate, deconstruct, and decenter. These practices can also be applied to ecological identity in the need to shift from an anthropocentric worldview, of humans being the center, dominant over nature, to a more eccentric worldview, where humans are nature as a whole entity together.

Both academic methods of research and western relationships to nature encourage a more disconnected, "neck-up" approach that has rigid boundaries between roles and relationships while that rigidity overlooks the reality of the presence of the researcher, their positionality, identities, and context within which they are researching. The concept of fostering ecological identity is one where I hope to encourage more awareness of the connection between the person experiencing nature, the context of the natural world around them, and their agency as an influencer in the natural world. The field of ecopsychology sees "the environmental crisis as being rooted in a psychological crisis where humans of modern, industrialized and technological civilizations have separated their identities from the rest of the natural world, which leads to seeing the planet as (merely) a resource for human consumption" (Davis & Canty, 2013 p. 4). Within the framework of action research, where the process, assumptions, and methodology recon-

necting the researcher as a human part of the process who is also experiencing the process. The same recognition for participants as part of the process, also experiencing the process, and influencing the process of the ecological experience of life will hopefully be made more apparent. In this way, I believe the strengths and nuance of action research complement this theme well.

### Needs Assessment

With an awareness of ecosystems, and in an attempt to compensate for self-identifying “outdoorsy” folks, I had planned to study all staff who work on the floor of the building within which OA is located—the bottom floor of the University Centre (UC) building. This would include staff (student staff and professional staff) from offices such as OA, Student Support Services, The Commuter Commons, Centre for Health and Wellness promotion, The Office of Ethical Development and Restorative practices, staff from the Sanitation team, US Bank, and One Stop student center. I had hoped to research how I can effectively enhance ecological identity among the community that I work within on a daily basis. In doing so, I was hoping to transcend the silo-type nature of various offices within the first floor and create more of a community, bringing more awareness to our immediate community that we interact with daily. I had also hoped this geographically boundary area would invite an array of folks with a variety of diverse identities and varying perceptions and beliefs about what the outdoors and/or nature means to them.

Unfortunately, 2020 had other plans. The global pandemic saw me return to my home country of Australia and as such research needed to transition to remote options. This pivot of design resulted in my new target audience for recruitment being Graduate students enrolled in programs in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES). Recruitment began with an open invitation for folks to participate in the study, which would (now) comprise three cycles: an online survey, and two short nature activities with some reflective journaling in response to prompts, following the activity. Participants were offered \$20 worth of gear rental at OA for each cycle they completed. With this incentive, 9 participants signed up.

## Methodology II

For this project I used O'Leary's (2004) model of Action Research cycles. This model incorporates four phases into each cycle: observe, reflect, plan, act.

Cycle 1: Recruiting Participants and Surveying Baseline Understanding and Awareness of Ecological Identity (December 2020)

### Observe

From observations of classes and interactions with students within SOLES for the past year I have already formed relationships with many fellow students in SOLES

### Reflect

Upon reflecting that all students in SOLES have their own awareness of their ecological identity that is occasionally mentioned in informal conversations with me, I wonder how often that conversation happens with other students who do not represent OA. In these reflections, I wish to explore further what ecological identity means to these people, how often and in what ways they deepen this connection, and what barriers they experience to developing their ecological identity.

### Plan

For this phase I planned to recruit participants to the study. I planned to send out an email and consent form to invite them to participate in the study. I also planned to email a survey which introduced the working definition of Ecological Identity for the study and asks a series of questions as to how often and in what ways they are aware of connecting to their ecological identity.

### Act

For this phase I emailed out the survey and answered questions that arose from participants. In this first cycle, I also offered the designated time frame within which to return surveys to give myself time to analyze the data.

## Cycle 2: Short Nature Activity and Journaling From Reflective Prompts (January 2021)

### Observe

Nine participants responded to the survey and shared their thoughts to the 10 questions posed.

### Reflect

I found myself very excited to read the survey responses and analyze the data. Recognizing also that I wish I had chosen to include questions around social or identity data. I am conscious of knowing a few of the participants and this gives me a sense of the gender, age etc. of my research participant group, which is knowledge that I have not explicitly collected in this research. This is a helpful learning for future projects.

### Plan

Having analyzed the first cycle, I chose to tweak a few of the reflective questions I posed for cycle two. The somewhat revised questions for cycle two were then sent out.

### Act

In this phase, I sent the email with instructions for the second cycle of research to be completed asynchronously and returned within the month.

## Cycle 3: Second Nature Activity and Journaling in Response to Reflective Prompts

### Observe

The timing of results from cycle two being returned to me are sporadic, with some participants needing an extra prompt after the time has passed. Data from Cycle 2 are showing up in ways I had hoped when planning the project.

## Reflection

Reflections for my practice in education and leadership are that the data are already showing that a short, slow, free, creative activity can strengthen folks' sense of their ecological identity, and I am creatively brainstorming as to how to incorporate this into my work in the future.

## Plan

The third cycle can be sent out as originally planned, sticking with the same reflective prompts as cycle two for consistency and continuity.

## Act

Instructions on how to complete Cycle 3 of the research is emailed out, with an expected return date of within the month.

## Results and Analysis of Themes

The invitation to participate was sent out as an email to all students, staff, and faculty of the Department of Leadership studies. This adaptation to the research plan was due to the nature of the global pandemic, and remained in alignment with my initial intention to have a wide-ranging invitation that is not targeted toward outdoorsy-identified people. Folks were quick to respond to the invitation to participate in the study, and I chose to cap the number of participants to nine. Two of the nine participants did not complete the second or third cycle of research. I chose not to collect any social or identity data, operating from an idea that each of us is an ecological agent and bring unique ideas to that concept. In hindsight, these data could have proved valuable in understanding in more depth perhaps how these social and identity factors could offer themes in terms of ecological connection or barriers.

The first cycle of the 10-question survey offered varied responses. Seven of nine people responded positively to the idea of outdoor adventures, relating the concept to freedom, a feeling of connection to the Earth, a sense of joy, calm, and grounding. Although the majority connected positively with their meaning of outdoor adventures, two folks responded that they did



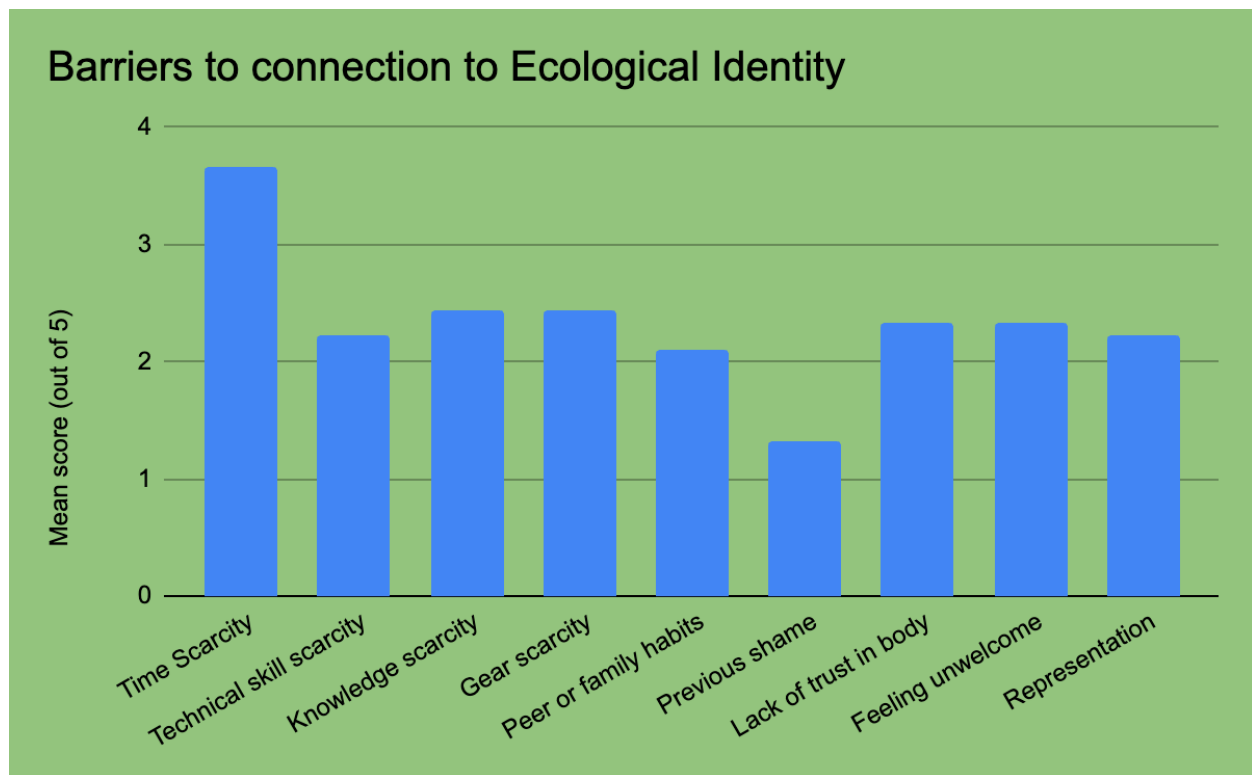
not identify with outdoor adventures. One participant offered, “The first thing that comes to mind is money, exclusivity, and what rich White people do on their vacation or free time.” This was actually an exciting response to me as this is a perspective I had not heard offered freely, perhaps due to my own identity as an outdoor adventure advocate. While I felt buoyant and connected in reading a lot of the positive responses—particularly as I find it very easy to relate to these experiences—a dissenting voice holds value in understanding the diversity of experiences of people within the outdoors. Figure 1 is a word cloud populated with responses to the prompt “Define Outdoor Adventures” with the size of the word indicating the frequency of word use. Although not the most visible, the words “stolen,” “exploitation,” “White,” “exclusivity,” and “money” feature in small font around the margins. My hope in this research was to hear perspectives from less heard voices on the margins of outdoor adventures, so I was grateful to have some of these voices participating in the research.

One question on the survey inquired as to barriers folks might experience in connecting their ecological identity. I suggested potential inhibitors and asked for them to rank how likely it was that this factor impacted their capacity to connect with their ecological identity. Unsurprisingly, the most common barrier for folks was time scarcity. Interestingly, the second most common factor was not feeling welcome, with five of nine respondents citing this as occasionally true. Limited access to gear or technology and lack of knowledge was equally limiting for five of nine participants. One third of responses offered that lack of representation was also a significant barrier.



Figure 2

## Barriers to Connection



In response to the prompt “Describe a moment when you have felt deeply connected to nature”, many beautiful tales of nature connection time were shared. What was quite striking to me in reading through the responses was the quiet, observational, reflective, and passive nature of many of these moments. Verbs such as standing, sitting, watching, realizing, and thinking were prominent. I was also aware that even the act of reading these responses evoked a feeling of connection to nature within me. In fact, one survey respondent mentioned books they chose to read when feeling disconnected from nature, offering data that creative activities can offer moments of nature connection without even the need to be outside at all.



Reflective responses to the second and third cycle offered insight into the interconnected web of life of which humans are part, and the consciousness that can come from brief activities designed to enhance this awareness. One participant said:

“I was surprised by how I wanted to add what was in the background – the context of the tree, but according to the instructions I only was asked to draw the plant. I think this is in some ways not surprising to me because I am a “context girl” and I realize about most things in life that context matters. So, this one solo tree sketch is not representative of its whole world which rests among other trees.”

This idea of context is one for which I was aiming, with the understanding that each individual human is not representative of the whole world as each is resting amid a community of other ecological beings. This awareness can lead to deeper understanding of one’s role as ecological agents, who impact communities with actions, whether intentional about this or not.

Another clear message about the value of the creative process came from the following response of another participant:

“I noticed as the project began I was worried about doing the project well – seeking perfection in the sketch. And as the sketch was completed, I had let go of that perfection and was simply enjoying the process of giving that sketch more life, more contours, more color.”

When connecting with nature within an outdoor adventures context, it can be easy to get caught up in the competitive or achievement side of things. This can show up as stress around not having the “right clothes” to wear, the most high-tech gear, the expectations of performance within connection to nature— “summitting” a mountain for example. However, there is no “perfect way” to connect with nature. Human-constructed ideas of perfection do not exist in nature. To be prompted by nature to release these ideas of perfection, to remember and experience this on a regular basis can enhance physical, mental and spiritual health.

The idea of connection for which I am striving in drawing attention to ecological identity was captured in another reflection from a participant when they got lost in the idea of where peers came from: “These activities influenced my sense of Ecological Identity in that they help me feel more a part of, and not separate from the world and the organisms around me.” With these and many more reflective responses I received, it became clear that connection and health were increased as a result of the 10-minute nature activities. With this in mind, my recommendations are as follows.

### Limitations and Recommendations

#### Social and Identity Data

My initial plan for the research project was to not collect any social or identity data as I believed that did not matter—each human is an ecological being and further identity data would not offer further insight into one’s barriers or ways of connecting to ecological identity. With further reflection upon this, I believe this was a significant oversight. A lot of my valuable learnings within the literature review shaped my understanding of who feels left out of OA, and my own informal experience of interacting with folks who do not feel like OA is for them. Within these informal interactions, I would clearly be taking in and evaluating social or identity data unconsciously, and sometimes consciously, to try and identify patterns of who feels included or excluded. With hindsight, I would explicitly collect this data within the first round of survey questions to deepen my understanding of who my participants were, what their life experiences and context might be like, and how that can shape their ecological identity.

A potential challenge or limitation about which I was concerned was in sparking a very personal grasp of one’s own ecological identity, and shifting the expectation of understanding this as a fixed, stable intellectual idea to a more dynamic worldview that can be helpful and connecting throughout every day even in small moments. Essentially, I was hopeful of shifting participants (and myself) from a mostly anthropocentric worldview (humans as dominant over nature) to a more ecocentric worldview (humans are nature, we are all interconnected; (Hayes-Conroy & Vanderbeck, 2005) and understand how my practice can continue to nurture this shift

and inspire more movement toward an ecocentric worldview. I believe factors such as the exclusive and oppressive history of outdoor education, the commercialization of wellness culture, and the call for a shift to ecocentric worldviews often using shame, blame, and guilt as motivation are all challenges people can experience in getting a sense of their own ecological identity development.

### Language

The term “ecological identity” is clunky. However, I still think it has value. In my experience of the academic setting, cognitive knowledge is rewarded but knowledge in the body is minimized. One indicator of this is the OA department needs to create its own revenue to keep operating. This is despite it being situated under the student affairs umbrella, where all other departments receive funding to operate. As a result, OA is limited in programing capacity to that which is designed for folks who will commit to and pay for the program. This immediately puts pressure on the department to create programming that is not necessarily inclusive or accessible; students in the lower socioeconomic bracket cannot afford to pay for programs, and are likely working on weekends when the bigger programs are run. If someone is unsure if they will be welcome, fit, or skilled enough to enjoy the program, it is a big risk to commit to and pay for a program. I would recommend the university consider more funding to support OA to offer programing that can help a more diverse range of folks connect with nature in a safe, fun, and supportive way.

With more financial support, I believe OA could offer broader programing that could move beyond colonial concepts of outdoor adventures. These offerings could include growing food on campus. Other options could be continued collaboration with the Office of Tribal Liaison to learn more about Kumeyaay stories and knowledge of the land, including native plant identification and traditional uses for the plants. Other suggestions include nature sketch sessions, a bird-watching club, story-telling evenings and podcast creation around Ecological Identity and connection to nature.

With that in mind, I believe a change in the name of the department could further shift the concept of what OA can be. As is evident from my survey results, the name “Outdoor Adventures” does not speak to all and can be perceived as exclusive even for those who enjoy spending time in nature. I believe it does not capture the full range of values held and practiced by the department. As such I believe a more inclusive name could be more inviting. Although I do not have any strong suggestions, I think something around the idea of Active Environmental Justice could be more inclusive, although unfortunately less catchy or able to be made into a pun.

### Conclusion

My goal in this project was to deepen my understanding of how to foster ecological identity. Inspired by the connection and grounding the Māori Pepeha can offer when asking students to introduce themselves, my intention with this research was to understand more about ways in which people connect to themselves as nature and are aware of their identity as an ecological agent. In researching this, it was also helpful to understand the barriers people experience that inhibit this connection. As the literature shares, the foundations, industry messaging, and program design of the outdoors experiential education world can be exclusive and perpetuate systems of oppression. With this in mind, design of the research included a mixed methods approach, with Action Research being a complementary form of research. There are strong parallels between a principle of Action Research being that of awareness of the researcher as an integral part of the project; and a goal of this Ecological Identity research being that of creating awareness of ourselves as integral part of nature that has a significant impact on nature. The research cycles included a short online survey, and the second and third cycle consisted of the option to choose one of two short nature activities, followed by some reflective journaling in response to prompts. The number of participants was nine, and although the global pandemic disrupted to process of this project, the three cycles were completed independently and asynchronously.

Results showed varying associations with outdoor adventures the majority of which was positive, growth, and connection-oriented experiences; however, there were some who felt ex-



cluded by the term or idea of outdoor adventures. The nature activities proved enjoyable for all. All reflections shared connection, joy, and many commented on broadened perceptions of their role within nature. With the positive feedback from these activities, it is recommended "OA" design programs with similar elements that are short in duration, slow, creative, and quieter activities to add to the existing program offerings. This of course would be far more achievable if the university were able to give value of the financial kind to the knowledge that the body holds, and to fund OA to offer more inclusive programming. A name change of Outdoor Adventures to something associated with connection or environmental justice would also metaphorically open the door to welcome in a more diverse student body. These are some of the many learnings I will be taking with me from this action research project.

As a result of this project, I have a deeper understanding of the ways in which different people perceive OA, and the ways they connect to nature and themselves. The barriers described by research participants offer invitations to further study to minimize inhibitors in nature connection. I believe my practice of leadership and that of an experiential educator has become far richer as a result of this research and my own connection to my ecological identity is strengthened immeasurably as a result. I do feel inspired to see future understandings of and more tangible measurement of ecological identity as humans continue the journey as hopefully more intentional agents of ecological change.

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**APPENDIX A: Consent form**

University of San Diego  
Institutional Review Board

Research participant consent form  
For the study:

Expanding colonial concepts of Outdoor Adventures through Ecological Identity

- A. The purpose of this study is to understand ways in which participants connect to their ecological identity, and how I can support and deepen this connection through my practice
- B. For this study, you will be asked to complete a survey regarding your connection to your Ecological Identity. You will be asked to complete two brief nature activities, and document reflection in response to questions after these activities. You will be asked to participate in a 30 minute zoom interview in audio format which will be recorded.
- C. Foreseeable risks or discomforts:  
Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hour a day: San Diego Mental Health Hotline. If you would like to speak to someone at the University of San Diego Centre for Health and Wellness: 619-260-4618.

Your voice will be recorded during the zoom audio interview. You also may choose to record your voice as a reflective journal activity. We may wish to present some of the recordings at professional meetings or as demonstrations in the classroom. Your voice may be used and you may potentially be recognized by listeners of the recording. The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may be used in future research.

D. Benefits:

You will receive compensation in the form of gear rental credit at Outdoor Adventures, University of San Diego to the amount of \$20 per cycle of research participated in, up to a total of \$80. You will be eligible to receive this benefit even if you withdraw from the study. There is also the indirect benefit of knowing that you helped researchers better understand how to expand colonial concepts of Outdoor Adventures through Ecological Identity at the University of San Diego.

- E. Confidentiality: Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of 5 years. The results of this research may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings and for educational purposes.

F. Voluntary nature of this research:

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question at any time or quit any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any of the benefits you are entitled to in a credit on gear rental at Outdoor Adventures. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

I have read and understood this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Researcher:  
Beth Farrell  
[efarrell@sandiego.edu](mailto:efarrell@sandiego.edu)

Supervisor:  
David Karp  
[dkarp@sandiego.edu](mailto:dkarp@sandiego.edu)

**APPENDIX B: Recruitment email**  
**Sent to: all Graduate students in SOLES**

Hello,

My name is Beth Farrell and I am a graduate student in the Masters of Higher Education Leadership program. I am researching Ecological Identity with the focus of expanding colonial concepts of 'Outdoor Adventures.'

In this study, Ecological Identity is defined as an awareness of how one relates with nature, and awareness that we, as humans, are nature. This research will investigate how I can support folks in connecting to their ecological identity in order to offer more accessible and inclusive nature connection. I will be exploring ways folks connect with their ecological identity, what barriers they experience in this connection and how I can support and help deepen this connection with my own work.

Participants are invited to participate in up to three cycles of research

1: An online survey (**10-15 minutes**)

2: A nature activity, either: a 10 minute sit outside listening; or a flower sketch, with reflections through journaling or voice memo.

3. A second nature activity: 10 minutes of walking outside or a plant-based mindful meal (fruit, smoothie, vegetables) with reflections through journaling or voice memo

Research will be conducted between **November 2020 - January 2020**, with one month to complete each cycle. In gratitude for your time, you will be offered credit on gear rental at Outdoor Adventures, with credit of \$20 worth of gear rental for each cycle participated in.

If you would like to participate in this research, please respond no later than November 15th. If you have any questions regarding this research please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Beth Farrell

## APPENDIX C: Cycle 1: Survey

### Ecological Identity Survey

The purpose of this survey is to understand ways in which you connect to your ecological identity, and barriers you experience in doing so. For this study, I am defining ecological identity as one's awareness of their relationship to nature, and identity as an ecological being that is nature. Any sensory experience with nature can be a connection to ecological identity, including breathing with awareness, feeling the warmth of sun on your skin, stretching, walking the dog - as can more immersive or intense activities: a day hike, a swim, a game of basketball, dancing, growing and harvesting your own food.

Please describe a moment when you have felt deeply connected to nature

Please describe a moment when you have felt deeply connected with yourself

How often would you say you have an awareness of your Ecological Identity:

1. Very frequently
2. Frequently
3. Occasionally
4. Rarely
5. Very rarely
6. Never

How important is it to you to develop your Ecological Identity?

1. Very Important
2. Important
3. Moderately Important
4. Slightly important
5. Not important

What are barriers you experience in connecting to your Ecological Identity?

- Time
- Lack of technical skills
- Lack of knowledge or understanding
- Limited access to gear, specific clothes or technology
- Peer or family habits that discourage this
- Lack of trust in my body
- Intimidation, not feeling welcome
- Previous experience of shame when connecting with Ecological Identity

What other barriers do you experience when in connecting to nature or connecting to yourself?

What are some current practices you have for connecting with your Ecological Identity?

Are there practices you would like to use in the future for connecting with your Ecological Identity?



**APPENDIX D: Cycle 2: Nature connection.**

Choose from one of the following activities:

2.a) **Listening**: Find a place outside that feels comfortable for you. Ideally a green space, under a tree in a park, however any outside space where you feel comfortable sitting with your eyes closed for 10 minutes. Once you have found your space, settle in. Set a timer for 10 minutes. If you feel comfortable, close your eyes. If not, pick an item to gently focus on. For the next 10 minutes, pay attention to the sounds you hear. When the timer rings, please take a moment to respond to the reflection questions.

2.b) **Plant sketch (journal and pen/pencil required)**: Find a plant that you are interested in. In your journal, take some time to sketch the plant in all its fine details. Be sure to really take your time, and take note of the structures of the plant. Once this is complete, please take a moment to respond to the reflection questions.

Reflection questions:

1. What did you notice during the activity?
2. Was there anything that surprised you? If so, please describe.
3. Did you notice any difference in your mind during or after the activity? If so, please describe?
4. Did you notice any difference in your body? If so, please describe.
5. Did you notice any barriers or resistance to completing this activity? If so, please describe.
6. How would you say this activity influenced your sense of Ecological Identity?

## APPENDIX E: Cycle 3: Nature connection part 2

Choose one of the following activities

3.a) **Walking**: This activity is a 15 minute walk. You are encouraged to do this activity without listening to any devices, and can be done alone or with a friend. When you have finished your walk, please take a moment to respond to the reflection questions.

3.b) **Plant-based mindful eating**: This activity can be completed in many different ways - eating a piece of fruit, drinking a smoothie, harvesting some veggies, or preparing and eating a meal that is largely plant based. While consuming this meal, take your time to notice the textures, smells, sound, taste and experience of eating the meal. Take a moment to consider the journey of the plant to get to this moment. Once you have finished your meal, please respond to the reflection questions.

Reflection questions:

1. What did you notice during the activity?
2. Was there anything that surprised you? If so, please describe.
3. Did you notice any difference in your mind during or after the activity? If so, please describe?
4. Did you notice any difference in your body? If so, please describe.
5. Did you notice any barriers or resistance to completing this activity? If so, please describe.
6. How would you say this activity influenced your sense of Ecological Identity?