

Nature Sports

Subjects: Social Issues

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Nature sports comprise a group of sporting activities that are developed and experienced in natural or rural areas, ranging from formal to informal practices. These practices are performed in a variety of natural contexts including on land (mountain biking, rock-climbing, trekking, etc.), in water (kayaking, sailing, surfing, windsurfing, etc.), and in the air (paragliding and hang-gliding, etc.). Nature sports have a spontaneous, playful nature, "with participation predominantly taking place in informal settings, often without governing bodies or clubs or other forms of external regulation". They are generally autonomous activities, even if some nature sports are practiced collectively, such as kayaking, or those which create sporting sub-cultures, such as in surfing.

Keywords: ecopedagogy ; ecoliteracy ; systemic sustainability ; relational equity ; circular economy

1. Background

Both nature and sports are contested ideological sites that require a reframing of the dominant narratives which undergird both constructs. These narratives focus on competition, opposition, and conquering the Other, whether by conquering Nature or other human beings and/or groups. There is an inherent violence and corresponding risk associated with these reigning renderings, whether actual and/or perceived. This notion suggests that combined, *nature sports*, as a unifying concept, offer the possibility of resisting the ways in which both constructs have been conceived and therefore experienced.

As Booth ^[1] has argued, nature sports are an ideal vehicle to delve into Western ontology and the grounding assumptions of both sport and nature as distinct constructs or categories. Taken together, the unified concept of nature sports challenges epistemological binaries of mind and body and of culture and nature ^{[2][3][4]}. He ^[1] notes, "the abstract concepts and categories of ontology, that are typically presented as binary opposites, do not readily marry with lived experiences and practices ^[5] that are invariably complex, contextualized, nuanced and situational; nor are they necessarily 'proved' by empirical evidence, notwithstanding the common retreat into data to support ontological arguments" (p. 21).

This effort to transcend the ontological bifurcation of nature and culture offers the possibilities of a convergence between human beings and nature ^[6], surfacing a kinship or relational sensibility between the human and nonhuman material world ^[1]. This suggests that there is an interconnectedness between all parts of the natural world, always in flux and adaptation, or what Warden ^[7] identifies as the 'inside, outside, and beyond' of nature as place. For her, *inside* represents one's inner self, *outside* represents our relationships with others, both the living and non-living elements of the planet. *Beyond* reflects "the unobservable, the undefined web of in-betweenness that stretches across the observable and unobservable aspects of our lives" (p. 7).

Experientially, nature sports inscribe meaning on bodies in motion, with a blurring or erasure of boundaries, as participants become one with nature ^{[8][9][9]}. Individuals may also experience this blurring of boundaries as a transcendence of the mind-body ontological distinction. Individuals describe these moments of interconnectedness of mind and body, the balancing of human and physical nature, as evoking a sense of spirituality ^[10]. These transcendental experiences have been referred to as 'slow time' ^{[11][12][13]}, 'flow', 'the sublime' ^{[1][14]}, or 'euphoria' ^[15]. In this regard, nature sports symbolize a sense of spatial, temporal, and institutional autonomy ^{[2][16]}.

2. A Unifying Concept

In their editorial entitled 'Nature sport: a unifying concept', Melo, Van Rheenen, and Gammon ^[2] challenge fellow scholars to question existing theoretical assumptions and heuristic biases at the nature—sport nexus. They underscore the need to reconceptualize nature "as a set of fluid positions and orientations through which embodied experiences inscribe and produce meaning and purpose" (p. 11).

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Nature sports have a spontaneous, playful nature, “with participation predominantly taking place in informal settings, often without governing bodies or clubs or other forms of external regulation” ^[17] (p. 117). They are generally autonomous activities, even if some nature sports are practiced collectively, such as kayaking, or those which create sporting sub-cultures, such as in surfing.

Nature sports involve interacting with a natural or material feature, rather than with other human beings, and participants gain the opportunity to strive, employ, and develop their skills in relationship to nature ^[18]. They are generally non-aggressive activities that involve little to no human bodily contact ^{[19][20]}. While some nature sports activities are highly competitive, evidenced in their inclusion within the modern Olympic Games, such as sailing, windsurfing, mountain biking, surfing, and rock-climbing, the structure of nature sports activities often varies from traditional sporting practices.

As such, this unique group of physical activities provides an alternative to the traditional ways of seeing, doing, and understanding sport ^{[21][22]}. With new forms and configurations emerging regularly ^{[1][22]}, nature sports represent a countercultural phenomenon ^{[23][24]}, highlighting the socio-cultural ways in which these novel sporting practices have developed in contrast to traditional sports and their dominant values ^{[21][20][24][25][26][27]}.

Nature sports reflect the social and cultural changes of late capitalism that have taken place since the end of the twentieth century. These changes have triggered a meaningful transformation within the larger system of sporting practices ^{[2][16]}. Although each nature sport “has its own specificity; its own history, (politics of) identities and development patterns, there are commonalities in their ethos, ideologies as well as the consumer industries that produce the commodities that underpin their cultures” ^[21] (p. 11).

Active participation in nature sports is directly associated with active sport tourism. The relationship between nature sports and tourism has drawn considerable attention to the potential and real economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts of these activities, both positive and negative. Numerous scholars have discussed these tripartite impacts in terms of the triple bottom line ^{[28][29][30][31][32]}, seeking to enhance positive outcomes while mitigating the negative impacts. Nature sports have a particular focus on these activities relative to the environment. This relationship is complex and, at times, highly destructive. However, the relationship affords possibility for greater compassion and understanding, the potential for developing an environmental consciousness, and genuine ethic of care for nature.

3. Nature Sports and Sustainability

The social and historical development of nature sports has corresponded with the articulation of environmental policies. Nature sports and other outdoor recreation activities developed in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, when national policies emerged regarding the preservation of land. This development led to the conservation and management of natural spaces in the late nineteenth century and the creation of the national park system in the beginning of the twentieth century ^[33]. The creation of the national park system in the USA, followed by similar initiatives throughout the world, allowed the combination of wildlife protection with the practice of nature sports and other recreational activities ^[34].

These efforts toward environmental protection and preservation have often run counter to the frenetic expansion of nature exploration and the proliferation and corresponding diversification of nature sports beginning in the late twentieth century. Negative impacts on nature include, among others, natural landscape destruction, soil erosion, water and air pollution, detrimental behavioral shifts of animal species, and the deterioration of monuments and historic sites. Pristine places or sites have been overrun by nature sports enthusiasts—surfers, climbers and mountain bikers, to name a few—leaving these places littered in their wake, with plastic water bottles, empty cans and human excrement. Some of the better and lesser known examples of these paradises littered if not lost include Mt. Everest (‘the world’s highest garbage dump’), once secret surfing spots overrun with boarding enthusiasts, and inexperienced adventurers flocking to back country locations such as the Wind River Mountain Range in western Wyoming ^{[35][36][37][38][39][40]}. In addition to putting themselves in physical danger while straining local search-and-rescue systems, these enthusiasts often disturb or disrupt plant and animal life. For example, some rock climbers will ‘garden’ a climb, using a stiff brush to clean off lichen and mosses from rock faces on their ascent. These species are important parts of a thriving ecosystem, many of which having flourished in these places for decades, if not centuries ^{[41][42][43]}.

As such, nature sports have the potential to damage environmental resources, an outcome that generates considerable disquiet among environmentalists and well-meaning participants. Such anxieties have resulted in a call for more sensitive management approaches to protect particularly vulnerable sites, such as zoning and access-reduction initiatives [44][45][46][47], as well as a call for a genuine ethic of care for nature and an interspecies communion [1].

Despite the potential negative environmental impacts caused by nature sports, these activities promise the possibility of environmental conservation and protection when developed and managed in a sustainable and authentic way [44]. The various sites and facilities developed for these activities (trails, tracks, routes, take-off and landing areas, mooring buoys, submerged paths, shops, parking, etc.) have contributed to sound conservation management practices, thus reducing the exploitation of the environment. This intentional process allows participants to enjoy nature without harming or destroying it for their singular pleasure [2][16].

Nature sports promote the discovery and appreciation of the environment and its diverse and spectacular ecosystems. These activities potentially awaken a respect for, and a defense of, nature. Participants who immerse themselves in nature experience the beauty and grandeur of these places, creating the possibility for the construction of an eco-literacy and eco-citizenship [16]. As Brymer, Downey, and Gray [8] have argued, “feeling connected to nature leads to a desire to care for the natural world and contributes to more environmentally sustainable practices” (p. 193). In this regard, nature sports participants develop an intimate and reciprocal relationship with the natural world [45].

Space and land management remain important areas for the conservation of the environment, where nature sports and conservation combine to create a symbiotic relationship based on sustainability [46]. Nature sports guides and service providers have an important role in the promotion of sustainability, acting as environmental interpreters, role models, and activists [47][48][49]. Ideally, a positive economic impact can help maintain ecosystem protection, while a healthy ecosystem provides the venue for sustainable market supply, even growth [50][51][52][53]. And yet, we believe that this genuine ethic of care can only be realized through systemic sustainability efforts and an intentional commitment to relational equity.

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