Caring for the Environment: Challenges from Notions of Caring

Peter Martin[†]
La Trobe University

Abstract

In 2003 John Fien presented an argument for environmental education to encompass deep and wide caring for human and nonhuman nature (Fien, 2003). His philosophical discussion of care outlined work by Nel Noddings (1984; 1992). In this paper I continue that project by indicating how Noddings' work provides signposts for environmental educators to think about their students' relationships with the nonhuman natural world. I argue that one consequence of Noddings' conception of care is that advocacy for considering humans to be a part of nature might be counterproductive to developing a student's capacity to understand a caring relationship with nature. In conclusion I draw on the structure of a care ethic to suggest practical implications for environmental education and the development of a relational self.

In a previous issue of this journal, John Fien (2003) argued for an environmental education that broadens its theoretical framework beyond sociological and educational theory "to draw on the humanities, the arts, philosophy and ethics to learn how to care for, and yes, love, each other and the Earth" (p. 2). In developing his position, Fien referred to the writings of philosopher Nel Noddings (1984; 1992) among others, and especially to her work on caring. He notes that Noddings' conception of caring has three requirements – conceptual and emotive understanding, deep respect and intrinsic worth of others, and a willingness to act for the other – and equates this to what Stan van Hooft terms "deep caring" (1995). From this brief descriptive framework, Fien moved to consider the moral obligations of humankind to care deeply about all aspects of nature and the values that might constitute an ethic of deep caring. He did not pursue, in any detail, the generative possibilities and educational implications of Noddings' components for an environmental education underpinned by an ethic of care.

In this article, I will examine the underlying structure of Noddings' philosophy of caring, including the components noted above, and explore the implications for environmental education. I have used Noddings' work before (Martin, 1999) and found her philosophical analysis to be robust and useful in providing a clear conceptual framework from which to construct education *for* the environment.

[†]*Address for correspondence*: Dr Peter Martin, School of Outdoor Education and Environment, La Trobe University, Bendigo, Victoria 3552. Email: p.martin@latrobe.edu.au

The Structure of Caring

Caring, as it is commonly understood, is about showing concern for others. We are familiar with the caring professions such as nursing and social work and these set benchmarks for vocational caring. Some also regard teaching as a caring profession although popular opinion may not be so aligned. In the case of nursing or social work, a *carer* works with, and for, the *other*. Caring exists between one and the other and is *for* the wellbeing of the other. Thus, there is a separation of the carer and one cared for, although that separateness is variable. What does this mean for an ethic of care in education, particularly an environmental education charged with educating *for* the environment?

Fien considers one of the key themes in need of reconsideration through caring in environmental education is the human/nature relationship: "That we talk about 'people and the environment' rather than 'human and nonhuman nature' is a major philosophical flaw in western thinking and the way we think about nature in environmental education" (2003, p. 6). Fien's point is that humans ought be seen as a part of, not apart from, nature and that environmental education discourse ought to acknowledge that. But there is a practical unease for me in advocating, on the one hand, that humans are part of nature, while on the other hand calling for an underlying ethic of care as a conceptual guide to work in environmental education. If an ethic of care is to be a useful guide or a practical teaching tool in environmental education, the implications for human/nature relationships and its relevance to learners need to be clarified.

Much has been written about conceptions of nature, and most would agree that there are multiple contested natures, shaped and reshaped by politics, culture, time and space (see for example, Chambers, 1984; Cudworth, 2003; Marshall, 1995; Seddon, 1997; Young, 2000). Payne (1998) has argued that environmental education would be more relevant and effective if teachers understood better how children see and conceive of nature, so that learning could be more grounded in the reality of children's conceptual frameworks. His point is well made and is directly relevant to adopting an ethic of care in environmental education. So what do children believe nature to be? Loughland, Reid, Walker and Petocz's recent and extensive study of children's conceptions of the environment, in which they analyse data from 2249 primary and secondary school age students in NSW, offers some clues:

> In general, the majority of young people see the environment as 'something out there' – a place, possibly including living plants and animals, but essentially separate from themselves. Only a minority (about one in eight) see the environment from a relational point of view – something which supports and enhances their living, and which in turn requires their care and support. (Loughland, Reid, Walker, & Petocz, 2003, p. 14)

So, although deep ecology may promote an expanded sense of self (Sessions, 1995), nature as a part of self is not a conception that most school students hold. In my view effective environmental education cannot be based upon a conception of humans as part of nature. Rather, I support environmental education founded on an ethic of care and a concept of the self as a relational being. Although Loughland et al. (2003) suggest that a relational conception of the environment is uncommon among school children, I nevertheless consider it a worthy and achievable goal of environmental education. A relational self is a concept finding support in the literature of eco-feminism (see for example, Warren, 1990) and is well suited to both developing an ethic of care

and educational practice. To understand this further requires consideration of what Noddings (1984; 1992; 2002) has to say about the structure of caring.

Caring, according to Noddings, translates as action to improve the lot of the other:

> When I look at and think about how I am when I care, I realize that there is invariably this displacement of interest from my own reality to the reality of the other. (Noddings, 1984. p. 14)

Noddings (1984; 1992; 2002) describes how caring exists on a continuum from *natural* caring to *ethical* caring. In natural caring people experience a powerful unconscious obligation to care and act. In these instances any dilemma concerns the type of caring action to be taken, not any question of action itself. Perhaps the most recognisable form of natural caring is that between newborn and parent. The carer is truly there for the other, driven by an imperative that many might consider to be innate. Clearly there are exceptions to this caricature of a natural caring parent, but I trust the description is illustrative of the point. A move away from natural caring toward ethical caring involves increasing uncertainty of action and increasing choice. Ultimately, in ethical caring the obligation and intensity to act decreases until the imperative to act yields to the suggestion, "someone (else) ought to do something". For example, as I drive down the road in the rain past an unknown motorist struggling to change a flat type in slippery mud, I might hesitate, but I rarely stop to assist.

As noted above, Noddings suggests that caring requires a willingness to act for the other, but how is this generated? Noddings (1984; 1992) provides an answer here by suggesting that the imperative to act out of care, such as stopping to render assistance in the scenario above, is primarily a dictate of relatedness.

Relatedness

Despite encouragement of global egalitarian attitudes, people most actively care for those to whom they feel closely related. Proximity is the most powerful determinant of caring behaviour and is a precursor to relatedness (Josselson, 1996; Noddings, 1984; 1992). For example, if the person struggling with the flat tyre were my partner, I would certainly stop. If environmental education is to learn from the philosophy of caring, then relatedness must be deliberately built and fostered. Both Payne (1998) and Loughland et al. (2002; 2003) found that most young people conceive of the environment as "something out there". This provides the starting point for environmental education based on a care ethic and is a notion I will return to shortly.

Implicit in my discussion thus far is that relationships between people are structurally similar to relationships between people and nature. For example, consider the following reminiscence by the rock climber Mia Axon (1997):

> Last year in early spring, I had a love affair with a climb. Located in the wild Western desert, a piece of limestone captured my heart with all the nuances of a fickle lover: Giving, holding back, proud, moody, demanding, requiring patience and perseverance. (Axon, 1997, p. 60)

Rock climbing was also the activity that Karen Warren (1990) chose to illustrate the importance of first person narrative for environmental ethics. Her account of changing relationships with a rock climb illustrates how a conceptual framework of relatedness and a sense of care changed the way she climbed and thought about the cliff itself. Warren's analysis highlighted the importance of narrative giving expression to "felt sensitivity … a sensitivity to conceiving of oneself as fundamentally in relationship with others, including the nonhuman environment" (p. 135).

Some other eco-feminist scholars dissented from Warren's position. For example, Roger King argued Warren's view of nature was anthropomorphic, with the potential to serve human rather than environmental interests, and misleadingly suggests that humans can engage in authentic relationships with nature (King, 1991). In a later critique, Terri Field (1995) characterised human relationships with natural entities as "fantasized" and potentially promoting "inauthentic care" (p. 309-311). She also suggests an environmental care ethic typified by Warren's first person narrative is blind to relationships with artifacts and the built environment (Field, 1995).

Suggesting that people's relationships with entities in the environment have structural similarities to interpersonal relationships is clearly open to criticism, not least because there is little research to substantiate such a claim. However, considering the self as in relationship with others, including nonhuman nature, is conceivable for environmental educators. My purpose here is to raise the *possibility* of such a likeness becoming a pedagogical tool or means of informing educational practice. At the very least, the similarity between interpersonal and human/nature relationships offers a metaphorical window through which children can examine how relationships with nonhuman nature may develop. By implication this is the leap made whenever talk turns to caring for the environment. Caring, as understood by many, is predicated on relatedness and driven by proximity. The vexing philosophical questions of what constitutes a moral being in any relationship, and who is in the position to judge whether such a relationship is "fantasized" or "authentic" are thought provoking, but they ought not limit our exploration of the educational possibilities of an environmental ethic of care.

To return to my discussion of relatedness: if, as Loughland et al. (2002; Loughland et al., 2003) assert, most young people conceive of the environment as "something out there", then one clear implication is that environmental education should put a high priority on direct personal contact between children and nature. This acknowledges the separation between people and nature, but invites a closer proximity. In my early years as an educator I worked in an outdoor centre. Without fail the urban youths who visited the centre would pretend to shoot the ducks that inevitably lifted off the lake as we walked past. But they were the same youths who would admonish me if they thought that I was hurting the currawongs we banded as part of another program. The ducks were distant and already "enjoyed" an instrumental relationship as potential food, whereas the currawongs were closer, physically, and could be seen eye to eye. There is no magic in this example, but it serves to illustrate how an ethic of care and increasing proximity can influence behaviour.

Can a relationship with the other be said to exist if there is no personal contact? Can I expect my students to truly care for environments with which they have no personal experience or contact? An ethic of care suggests that I cannot; the best I might hope for is that students *care about*, for example, salination of the Murray River, but this is categorically different from *caring for* the Murray River. Noddings acknowledges the importance of people developing deep positive regard for the intrinsic worth of all beings and natural entities, but it is the degree of relatedness that continues to moderate the extent of this regard. This is a logical conclusion, simply because our capacity to care is limited. I make choices about how I enact caring because it is impossible for me to effectively care for all people and entities.

Reciprocity

Although proximity helps to determine relatedness, it does not necessarily sustain a relationship. According to Noddings (1984; 1992), any relationship will dwindle without nurturing. A relationship can only grow into and beyond a caring ethic if pathways

of responsiveness or "reciprocity" (Noddings, 1984, p. 86) are opened. The extent to which a relationship grows is determined by how effectively the carer can *perceive* that the subject of his or her care is responding. That makes sense. What remains as a challenge in environmental education is how to enable students to perceive that entities in nature somehow respond to their care or action. If environmental educators are unable to do this, then expectations of meaningful action might be limited. As Noddings (1984) puts it: "We are not obliged to summon the 'I must' [care] if there is no possibility of completion in the other" (p. 86). Children working with animals or tending gardens or tree planting are engaged in obvious actions that lend themselves to developing a care ethic between people and the environment, as responsiveness in these instances is more obvious. Despite seeking responsiveness risking charges of new-ageism, perceiving nonhuman nature as responsive to our care is an ancient and long held belief:

> Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel for country, and long for country. People say that country hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. ... country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and will toward life. (Rose, 1996, p. 7)

Conceptual and Emotive Understanding

A number of writers argue that thinking that is consistent with the ideas outlined above requires a special receptivity, including the capacity to change between two modes of consciousness - a receptive intuitive mode and a mode of rational objectivity, or a blending of both emotive and rational thought (see for example, Belenky, 1997; Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992; Sanger, 1997; Simpson, 1996`). Although I may have grown up being told to "leave your emotions out of it, be rational and don't cloud your thinking" seeing and feeling with nature's individuals is impossible with only rational objectivity, demanding as it does a separateness of subject and object. For educators interested in encouraging an ethic of care the capacity to think with the heart as well as the head is vital. This is the basis of another element in Noddings' approach to caring, namely, the need for conceptual *and* emotive understanding:

> An ethic of care does not eschew logic and reasoning. When we care we must employ reasoning to decide what to do and how best to do it. We strive for competence…. But reason is not what motivates us. It is feeling with and for the other that motivates us in natural caring…. In ethical caring this feeling is [increasingly] subdued and so it must be augmented by a feeling for our own ethical selves. (Noddings, 2002 p. 14)

Implications of the Structure of Caring for Environmental Education

The structure of caring that includes relatedness, reciprocity and particular ways of understanding all raise challenges for environmental educators. However, the most relevant implication of using caring as a basis for environmental education, and the implication missed by Fien's (2003) article, is that caring is predicated on a *separation*, in this case, a separation of humans and nature. A conception of nature as part of self and an ethic of care based on a relational self are logically incongruous. It is this incongruity that sparked a long running debate between deep ecologists and eco-feminists (see for example, Cheney, 1987; Fox, 1989).

One task of creating deep caring is to strive for *solidarity* between the self and the other (van Hooft, 1995) and so too must this be the task of environmental education, but it is a solidarity of separate beings. Caring as environmental education demands that students work at getting to know nature. Caring demands that a sense of proximity be created by having students engaged in experiencing, learning and sharing time with nature in the same sorts of ways we might get to know a new friend. In such caring for nature, students need to understand their relatedness to the environment as a subjective relationship, individual to individual. Caring for nature is also a challenge to any form of education that interprets nature as an external generic *object,* or set of objects. Rather, environmental caring education must seek to understand both rationally and emotionally the places, entities and nonhuman individuals with whom students develop specific personal lived relationships.

In summary there are perhaps four immediate advantages of imagining our relationships with nonhuman nature to be structurally similar to the caring relationships we may develop with relatives and friends:

1. It recognises the importance of emotion to knowing – emotion may well be the most ignored and misunderstood aspect of school learning, but for caring it is the principal motivator of action. Emotion is the glue that will help create what Saroj Chawla (1991) has called a "comprehensive-experiential vision of the natural environment" (p. 273).
2. It is something with which all students, of any age, can readily identify. Friendships are within everyone's lived experience and so environmental education can be based on direct personal experiences at all levels of schooling.
3. It allows analysis through the creation of a conceptual framework as we are charged with an "enactive" (Foster, 2005, p. 27) task of making sense of what the metaphor means in human existence. Students can readily describe the sorts of experiences they must build to create close friendships and, if they are permitted to draw parallels to getting to know a friend, can easily identify how they ought to structure and implement getting to know nature. In this way students have access to a conceptual process to both evaluate and shape human/nature relationships.
4. There is a close relationship between language, worldview and our dealings with the natural environment (Chawla, 1991). Human relationships with nature provide a language of analysis that in turn permits conceptual exploration. John Foster (2005) also highlights this aspect of metaphor when he describes how listeners apply "principals of communicative relevance" (p. 26) to determine what aspects of a metaphor are of importance to the subject and context in which it is used. The absence of a language that adequately describes human/nature relationships hinders conceptual understanding (Martin, 2002). Providing a language around human/nature relationships can help build an ecological literacy and alternate worldview. Barbara Bader (2004) makes this point generally in her analysis of discourse in environmental education when she concludes "reality is no longer something that exists outside the human being: … it takes shape through social linguistic processes" (Bader, 2004, p. 19).

Conclusion

For students in New South Wales schools, Loughland et al. (2003) conclude:

> Better knowledge of environmental issues [that occurs with successive years of schooling] has no correlation (perhaps even a negative correlation) with the development of a relational concept of the environment. (Loughland et al., 2003)

This is a sobering conclusion, but one that is congruent with the potency of a care ethic as a foundation for environmental education. If people develop a relational concept of the environment in ways similar to interpersonal relationships then I am not surprised by the conclusion. Knowledge of anatomy or physiology doesn't help my relationship with my partner. Caring relationships are built on shared experience, on multiple interactions over time in a diversity of contexts. The knowledge that informs caring is knowing about the likes, dislikes, idiosyncrasies, personal history and shared stories of a relationship.

In an environmental education curriculum informed by caring, students would experience first hand local environments and environmental issues. They would learn about the history of the place they are developing a relationship with. They would know what stories such places could share, they would recognise the past relationships that have enabled a place to prosper and begin to see through empathetic eyes the way in which differing relationships influence environmental and human futures. There is much an environmental ethic of care could offer in a cross-disciplinary approach. And, like any new acquaintance, developing a relationship with a place will take time and interest before this becomes a relationship characterised by an imperative to care and therefore act.

Today, the natural environment, like the person with the flat tyre, is struggling under the weight of circumstance. Environmental education based on caring predicts that for the majority of students who lack personal direct experience of nature, their response to witnessing such problems, will be to keep on driving.

Keywords: Environmental caring; relatedness; reciprocity; relational self.

References

Axon, M. (1997). Days of passion: Climbing outdoors. *Women's Sports and Fitness, 19,* 60–61.

Bader, B. (2004). Epistemological renewal and environmental education. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education, 20*(2), 13–22.

Belenky, M. F. (1997). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind* (10th anniversary ed.). New York: BasicBooks.

Chambers, D. W. (1984). *Imagining nature* (Rev. ed.). Waurn Ponds, Vic.: Deakin University Press.

Chawla, S. (1991). Linguistic and philosophical roots of our environmental crisis. *Environmental Ethics, 13*(3), 253–262.

Cheney, J. (1987). Eco-feminism and deep ecology. *Environmental Ethics, 9*(2), 115–143.

Cudworth, E. (2003). *Environment and society*. London: Routledge.

Field, T. (1995). Caring relationships with natural and artificial environments. *Environmental Ethics, 17*(3), 307–120.

Fien, J. (2003). Learning to care: Education and compassion. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education, 19*, 1–13.

Foster, J. (2005). Making sense of stewardship: Metaphorical thinking and the environment. *Environmental Education Research, 11*(1), 25–36.

Fox, W. (1989). The deep ecology-ecofeminism debate and its parallels. *Environmental Ethics, 11*, 5–25.

Josselson, R. (1996). *The space between us: Exploring the dimensions of human relationships*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

King, R. (1991). Caring about nature: Feminist ethics and the environment. *Hypatia, 6*, 75–89.

Knudtson, P., & Suzuki, D. T. (1992). *Wisdom of the elders*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Loughland, T., Reid, A., & Petocz, P. (2002). Young people's conceptions of environment: A phenomenographic analysis. *Environmental Education Research, 8*(2), 187–197.

Loughland, T., Reid, A., Walker, K., & Petocz, P. (2003). Factors influencing young people's conceptions of environment. *Environmental Education Research, 9*(1), 3–17.

Marshall, P. H. (1995). *Nature's web: Rethinking our place on earth*. London: Cassell.

Martin, P. (1999). Critical outdoor education and nature as friend. In J. Miles, & S. Priest (Eds.), *Adventure Education* (2nd ed.). State College, PA: Venture Publishing.

Martin, P. (2002). *A naturalistic inquiry into the role of outdoor education in shaping human/nature relationships*. Unpublished PhD thesis, La Trobe University, Victoria.

Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics & moral education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Noddings, N. (2002). *Educating moral people: A caring alternative to character education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Payne, P. (1998). Childrens' conception of nature. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education, 14*, 19–26.

Rose, D. (1996). *Nourishing terrains: Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness*. Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission.

Sanger, M. (1997). Sense of place and education. *The Journal of Environmental Education, 29*(1), 4–8.

Seddon, G. (1997). *Landprints: Reflections on place and landscape*. Cambridge; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Sessions, G. (1995). *Deep ecology for the twenty-first century* (1st ed.). Boston: Shambhala.

Simpson, S. (1996). A leopold for the nineties: The ecological age and outdoor recreation. *Journal of Experiential Education, 19*(1), 14–21.

van Hooft, S. (1995). *Caring: An essay in the philosophy of ethics*. Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado.

Warren, K. J. (1990). The power and promise of ecological feminism. *Environmental Ethics, 12*(2), 125–146.

Young, A. R. M. (2000). *Environmental change in Australia since 1788* (2nd ed.). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.