

Philosophy by Sea Kayak: reconnecting with the value of the natural world, and our relationships with it.

Just outside the bay the wind was whipping the sea into sheets of spray. The sound of the wind in the ragged oaks behind us combined with the waves breaking on the outer reefs to create an awesome sense of wildness. Some place to take your first ever trip in a sea kayak! However, the participants in an *Outdoor Philosophy* Sea Kayak course did just that and for a very good reason.

The sea is a powerful place. The waves breaking on the shore had travelled thousands of miles. The tide flowing into the loch was pushed and pulled metres a day up and down by the moon. To feel these movements under the hull of a slim kayak with the familiar land seemingly out of reach would give any human a sense of proportion and a feeling for the power of nature. Learning the basic strokes to keep your boat upright, drive it forward and turn provide an example of the real sense of our relationship with the environment, a partnership that with skill and knowledge we can enjoy but never control.

Outdoor Philosophy, a project founded and directed by Dr Kate Rawles, has at its heart the aims of kindling and sustaining our passion for nature at the same time as providing clarity about our impacts upon it. This combined with critical thinking about our lives supports participants in finding the motivation and direction to act in a more sustainable way both at home and at work.

That first day was awesome in many ways. Participants reached an uninhabited island, as remote as you can feel in the UK. They followed a tiny crack in the rocks of the shore representing a gap in the geological record of hundreds of millions of years. They were able to sit on the outer rocks as breaking waves plumed high above their heads. They found the skills to follow the coast and keep together, to stay warm and fed and to feel at ease. This immersion (in the [place but not in the sea!]), carefully facilitated to give a

sense of our place in nature without a feeling of fear, brought back a passion for our world that can be readily submerged in everyday urban life.

The participants were all graduates of Forum for the Future's masters degree in Leadership for Sustainable Development. They had volunteered to help Kate pilot her ideas together with outdoor educator Chris Loynes.

Being so far away from home and work and so close to nature is also an opportunity for contemplation. The second day lighter winds allowed the group to make a journey down the loch to a remote beach. Landing in the surf demanded new skills at the end of a hard windward paddle. The surprise shelter of a bothy, the last cottage with a roof in a row of abandoned houses, was very welcome. So was the firewood the leaders had carried in their boats that soon warmed and lit the main room. It was another perspective on our relations with nature that several families of people had once made their living in this place.

Lunch restored people for a chance to explore the surroundings. Spending time noticing the small things along the shore and the grand vistas out to sea provides a space for slow learning, time for the feelings to sink in and connect with a person's values and intentions. Tokens brought back to share with the group by the last of the fire, helped people to express their sense of a right way to live in relation with the world we are in. Feathers, pebbles, skulls and leaves conveyed meanings hard to articulate without their inspirational support.

That evening was playful. The local 'water of life' helped the group explore our culture as though it were sea going, from a swimmer in the water through kayaks, yachts, power boats, ships, tankers and oil rigs. Each provided a metaphor illuminating both how things are and how people thought things ought to be. Knowledge of our situation was shared and tested before personal visions were reviewed and developed.

The last day was calmer still. Islands even more remote were within reach. This trip was memorable to everyone for our encounters with the others that live in these places. The arctic terns fishing in the shallows circumnavigate Antarctica before returning to breed in Hebridean waters seeing more daylight in a year than any other animal. Perhaps the strongest memory was of the seals following the kayaks, bobbing up to get a good look at us, diving under the boats, visible as sleek outlines rippled by the surface water and silhouetted by the white coral sand just a few metres down. An otter delighted the few that saw it fishing amongst the kelp streaming in the strong tide. As one person put it 'It's as though nature is looking back at you, regarding you'.

That day we talked about how hard it can be to be a champion for change in a world unaware of the impact of its lifestyles on the livelihood of other living things. Each participant was moving on to work in an aspect of sustainability and the environment. Yet even with such committed people giving up the cheap flights or choosing to eat vegetarian were felt to be big challenges. Yet then and months later everyone was reminded of their sense of their place in the world and about paying more attention to how we relate to it. This has already led several to make personal changes to their lifestyles and, of course, to keep in touch with the wild.

The project was a big success and more courses will follow. Kate is keen to reach those who can make the biggest differences through their working lives as well as to help each individual adopt a life they feel is more at ease with the world they are in.

Kate Rawles is a lecturer in Outdoor Studies at S. Martin's College and directs *Outdoor Philosophy*. The development of *Outdoor Philosophy* courses was made possible by a NESTA award. Find out more about *Outdoor Philosophy* at <http://www.outdoorphilosophy.co.uk>